

# **Identity through the Themes of Life, Death and Loneliness**

**in Monica Ali`s**

***Brick Lane and In the Kitchen***

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# Chapter I: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Ever since I was a little girl, I have loved literature. When I chose to attend the course 'Colonial and Postcolonial Literature', in the spring term of 2008, a whole new world opened up for me. Having read little that could be included under the term 'colonial' or 'postcolonial' before, I found this new topic extremely exciting. Although I enjoyed the whole syllabus, one particular novel stood out: Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

I believe there are several reasons why I found this book so engrossing. First of all, it told a story from a world completely unknown to me. It was not only very interesting, but informative, to read about the culture and customs of the characters. But even though Ali's narrative dealt with traditions alien to me, I could actually still very easily identify with the young protagonist of the novel, Nazneen. Her everyday life and her struggles were in the main not the same as those faced by young women in Norway, but I found her feelings, her thoughts and opinions to be similar. In addition, Ali's language with her many delightful descriptions, made me enjoy *Brick Lane*. Her narrations about nature, the characters and the different cultures make the story seem real at the same time as it is sad, comic and beautiful. By using this novel, together with Ali's most recent novel *In the Kitchen*, as a basis for my MA thesis, I also hope to gain knowledge that can be used in my work as an upper secondary school teacher. Knowing that the textbook *Stunt*, which is widely used in Norwegian schools today, includes an abstract of *Brick Lane* together with exercises about postcolonialism, I find the novel and the subject relevant in this context.

In the spring of 2009, I attended the course 'Representations of India in British Fiction'. For my semester paper, I decided to write about the loneliness of the Bangladeshi

protagonist Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, analysing how she deals with an immigrant identity in her new country England. This identity changes through the narrative.

I have also chosen to discuss *In the Kitchen*, Ali's third novel in this thesis. Identity that alters is present here as well. The story is set in London, but in quite a different part than Brick Lane. The themes of life, death and loneliness are also apparent in *In the Kitchen*, something that makes it an interesting companion to *Brick Lane*. In addition, I think it is exciting to look at the protagonist Gabe's personality as he is struggling to find his true identity. But his approach to life is very different from that of Nazneen. The outcome of his actions is also surprising, something that made the novel stimulating to me as a reader.

Both novels portray a protagonist who goes through and has to deal with a breakdown. Both cases can also be explained by midlife crises (Nazneen's a very early one), but on different levels, though. For Nazneen, the fact that she is an immigrant female, plays an important part. I find the differences between the two cases interesting. But even though the characters have different personalities, the themes of the novels are similar. Both books are also set in today's London, and they both can be called *Bildungsromane*; 'A kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity' (Baldick 2008: 35).

Although it may not be as clear at first sight, identity is a highly relevant theme in Ali's second novel *Alentejo Blue* as well. In this novel too, the somewhat strange mixture of characters face life changing decisions, loneliness and identity crises. These characters are complex and interesting when it comes to the themes mentioned above, and their identities also eventually develop. Being of different genders and ages, having different kinds of interests and coming from different cultures, backgrounds and countries, they still have a lot in common: loneliness, and identity issues. Death is also central in the lives of the characters of *Alentejo Blue* as their Portuguese town has the highest suicide rate in the country. This

novel could very well have been a part of this thesis, but simply due to length limitations, I have chosen to focus on *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* which have more in common compared to *Alentejo Blue*.

In this thesis, I will start by presenting Monica Ali as an author before I go on to a description of theories of both literature and identity. Chapter two examines the novel *Brick Lane* in relation to identity and diaspora through the themes of life, death and loneliness. Women, fate and love and happiness are also parts of this chapter. To contrast and compare, the same themes are discussed in chapter three in addition to racism, this time through the novel *In the Kitchen*. Using the two novels as sources for the dissertation, I argue that Ali's books deal with the same identity issues, but in different environments.

## 1.2 Monica Ali

Finding interviews to be reliable, I have used the Internet together with *South Asian Writers in English* as primary sources to find the biographical information on the author Monica Ali. I have also corresponded with her through e-mails, and will use the details given by her later in this thesis.

Monica Ali was born in 1967 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, but grew up in England. Her English mother met her Bangladeshi father at a dance in northern England in the 1960s. Despite both of their families' protests, they later married and lived together with their two young children in Dhaka. This was then the provincial capital of East Pakistan which after a nine-month war of independence became the capital of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. On 25 March 1971 during this civil war, Monica Ali's father sent his family to safety in England. The war caused East Pakistan to secede from the union with West Pakistan, and was

now named Bangladesh (Haq: 20-21).<sup>1</sup>

In Bolton, England, home was apparently not as Monica Ali's mother had dreamed it: 'In London there was no one to meet us. My mother carried us across London on the buses and got on a train to Manchester. She had no money left'. Ali's father Hatem later managed to escape from East Pakistan over the border to India, and finally got permission to join his family. They planned going back home to Bangladesh, just like we will see is the case of some of the fictional characters in *Brick Lane*. But when Ali and her brother settled into school and eventually ceased to understand Bengali, there was no longer any plan of moving back.<sup>2</sup> Ali's parents ran a knick-knack shop for many years before Hatem took a degree in history, and Joyce, Ali's mother, became a counsellor.<sup>3</sup> According to Ali, 'We grew up in a not very salubrious part of Bolton, in a small flat in a low-rise block'. She compares it to that of her main character in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, and says that Nazneen's apartment is not an odd place for her to imagine because of where she grew up herself.<sup>4</sup>

After studying philosophy, economy and politics, Ali started working in marketing. She has always been a reader, but did not begin to write before after the birth of her first child. Ali did this anonymously and for herself, getting critique from other writers online. But when her grandfather died, she felt she could not put things on hold any longer and started working on her first novel, *Brick Lane* which was published in 2003. Today, Monica Ali

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<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, 'South Asia: Bangladesh' <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>> [accessed 8 September 2009]

<sup>2</sup> Monica Ali, 'Where I'm Coming From' <<http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/ali.html>> [accessed 8 September 2009]

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Lane, 'Ali's in Wonderland' <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jun/01/fiction.features1>> [accessed 9 September 2009]

<sup>4</sup> Marianne McDonald, 'My Year as a Star' <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3616570/My-year-as-a-star.html>> [accessed 8 September 2009]

...is one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists of the decade, Newcomer of the Year at 2004 British Book Awards and has been nominated for most of the major literary prizes in Britain. *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the George Orwell Prize for political writing and the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize. (Ali 2006: 1)

She published her second novel *Alentejo Blue* in 2006, and *In the Kitchen* in 2009.

Ali received great feedback and was hailed by the reviewers for *Brick Lane*, and the expectations for *Alentejo Blue* were high. The novel got mixed reviews, but the majority judged it to be a disappointment compared to *Brick Lane*. Critics agreed that Ali's second novel failed because of the collection of stories which form the novel. These were said to make the narrative lack coherence. On the other hand, reviewers enjoyed Ali's passages about the English characters, feeling she was getting closer to home.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ron Charles, 'Marking Time' <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/15/AR2006061501122.html>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

David Grylls, 'Tales of Woe' <[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/fiction/article724260.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article724260.ece)> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Sean O'Brien, 'Alentejo Blue, by Monica Ali' <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/alentejo-blue-by-monica-ali-480686.html>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Liesl Schillinger, 'The Simple Life' <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/25/books/review/25schillinger.html>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Jane Shilling, 'An Elegant Lack of a Conclusion' <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3652844/An-elegant-lack-of-a-conclusion.html>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Lionel Shriver, 'On the Way to Nowhere' <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3652842/On-the-way-to-nowhere.html>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Jessica Slater, 'Disconnected Story a Mosaic with Pieces Missing' <[http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/books/article/0,2792,DRMN\\_63\\_4777244,00.html](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/books/article/0,2792,DRMN_63_4777244,00.html)> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Catherine Taylor, 'Alentejo Blue by Monica Ali' <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/alentejo-blue-by-monica-ali-480823.html>> [accessed 15 October 2009]



Critics agreed that Ali's *In the Kitchen* held beautiful and excellent descriptions, but that this simply is not enough to make it an outstanding novel. It was judged to be too long, to contain too many clichés and an overuse of stereotypes while at the same time it was said to be unrealistic. Still, the quality of the prose was generally held to be what makes *In the Kitchen* worth reading.<sup>6</sup> Monica Ali lives with her husband, management consultant Simon Torrance, and their two children in south London. She has never gone back to Dhaka.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3 Literary Theories

In an e-mail to me, Monica Ali herself says that she did not have any literary theories in mind when writing her novels. She claims that this is a misunderstanding of how writing works as a

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Natasha Walter, 'Continental Drift'

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/may/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview14>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

<sup>6</sup>Marie Arana, 'The Cuisine of Death' <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/11/AR2009061104520.html>> [accessed 26 November 2009]

Carol Birch, 'In the Kitchen, By Monica Ali' <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/in-the-kitchen-by-monica-ali-1676693.html>> [accessed 26 November 2009]

Nina Lakhani, 'In the Kitchen, By Monica Ali' <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/in-the-kitchen-by-monica-ali-1693068.html>> [accessed 26 November 2009]

Stephanie Merritt, 'Check into the Imperial Hotel at Your Peril' <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/02/monica-ali-in-the-kitchen>> [accessed 26 November 2009]

Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Monica Ali' <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/5250974/Monica-Ali.html>> [accessed 26 November 2009]

Natalie Sandison, 'In the Kitchen by Monica Ali' <[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/fiction/article6161381.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article6161381.ece)> [accessed 26 November 2009]

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Lane, 'Ali's in Wonderland' <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jun/01/fiction.features1>> [accessed 9 September 2009]

Shahnaz Yousuf, 'Adhunika Blog' <<http://adhunika.org/blog/2008/06/18/brick-lane-by-monica-ali/>> [accessed 11 September 2009]

term like postcolonialism is only used in academia. Still, she states: 'But, of course, through them [the characters in her novels] I was interested in exploring some questions about the way we live and about British society' (Correspondence with Monica Ali, 12 April 2010).

Nevertheless, I will apply feminist and postcolonial literary theories in this thesis as I find them both important when reading *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen*. Ali's narrative *Brick Lane* begins in what was then East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) which had been part of British India until right after the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> Like *Brick Lane*, her novel *In the Kitchen* describes the difficulties for many immigrants in England. Gabe, one of the only two English white males, has the role of being their superior in the kitchen of a high class hotel in London, significantly named The Imperial with its connotation to the British empire.

Through history, the situation of women dominated by men has often been looked upon as a parallel to that of colonised subjects controlled by dominant colonisers. Therefore, women worldwide have oppression and repression in common with colonised people, and colonised women can consequently be considered to be doubly oppressed. Postcolonial views of history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in postcolonial theory (Ashcroft and others: 233). And colonial oppression does not end with independence. Thus, the novel about the young Bangladeshi woman Nazneen moving to England may be viewed in both a postcolonial and a feminist perspective. This is also relevant concerning women like the prostitute Lena and Gabe's employee Oona from *In the Kitchen*. Oona is an immigrant from the Caribbean. The majority of the countries in the region have been colonised by European nations.<sup>9</sup> However, I do not find Oona subject to obvious repression in England. Gabe cannot stand her, yet she stands strong as an independent woman who

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<sup>8</sup> The Commonwealth@60. Serving a New Generation <<http://www.thecommonwealth.org/>> [accessed 6 November 2009]

<sup>9</sup> Folkers, 'The Spanish Succession, Caribbean Colonies' <<http://www.spanishsuccession.nl/caribcol.html>> [accessed 29 January 2010]

expresses her own opinions and acts the way she wants to. The Belarusian Lena, on the other hand, has a different story. Belarus has also been controlled by several other countries through history, but gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>10</sup> As a woman, an illegal immigrant and a prostitute, Lena has been controlled by men to a much greater extent than the other female characters. When she tells Gabe that she has finally managed to escape from her pimp who wants to kill her, Gabe decides to take care of her. But even Gabe starts controlling her. Lena says that Gabe is keeping her inside his apartment, comparing it to a prison, a cage:

‘You don’t watch the news. You don’t read newspapers. Where did you go today?’ She turned away from him. ‘I go out’. ‘Yes. Where? Where did you go? Look at me, Lena. I said, where’. She whipped round. ‘Why you ask me like this?’ This scene went bad from here, as he remembered. What could he do? He felt sick. He was sweating. All he had to do was keep his mouth closed. ‘It’s a reasonable question’, he said. ‘You keep me here like... like prison. Like animal in cage’. He could see what he was doing wrong. He looked at himself with a mixture of pity and disgust. What a sap. What a fool. Would he never learn? ‘Do I lock you in? Do I beat you?’ He should know better than to shout. He did know better. But here we go again. ‘Don’t I give you everything you ask for and more?’. (341)

This passage shows how Gabe knows what he is doing is wrong. But still, just like Nazneen, Lena feels trapped due to the inequality in terms of power between her and Gabe, and between women and men in society in general.

Postcolonial literature encompasses texts that in some way or other refer to present or (mostly) former colonies or dependencies of European powers. Most often, the term covers writings from Africa, the Indian sub-continent, the Caribbean and other regions marked by colonialism (Baldick: 265). According to the textbook *Stunt*, colonial literature deals with issues like self-assertion, independence, race, East vs. West, the effects of colonialism, gender and prejudice; all these are applicable to *Brick Lane*, *In the Kitchen* and this thesis (Areklett

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<sup>10</sup> Bjørn Sandvik, ‘Hviterussland (Belarus)’ in *Globalis* <<http://www.globalis.no/Land/Hviterussland-Belarus>> [accessed 29 January 2010]

and others: 25). There is also a great interest in descriptions of diasporic groups that have moved to new countries, which is the case in *Brick Lane*, but also in *In the Kitchen*.

Postcolonial theory focuses on 'the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people' and 'literature by colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness'.<sup>11</sup> The themes of identity and the past are of particular interest to this paper as they carry the plot of both *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen*. I will comment on identity and the past later in the dissertation, and draw comparisons between postcolonial theory and the events of the novels.

*Brick Lane* is a postcolonial work as the protagonist is a Bangladeshi who moves to England, and parts of the novel are descriptions from Bangladesh. In addition, many thoughts and memories deal with the country that some of the characters wish to go back to. The colonial history is portrayed through the characters, mainly Nazneen's Bangladeshi husband Chanu who has lived in Britain for many years. Chanu always speaks about the country where he was born, and draws comparisons between Bangladesh and Britain. To him, it is important to tell his daughters and wife that their country is the one that has benefited England and not the other way around. Eventually, it may seem like he himself is the one he is trying to convince.

Postcolonialism is also relevant concerning *In the Kitchen*, but is maybe not as clearly shown as in *Brick Lane*. The protagonist of *In the Kitchen* is unlike Nazneen born and raised in England. But as mentioned above, his employees are not, as they are of different origins, and some from former colonies. The narrator compares them to a United Nations assembly (Ali: 99, 205). When one of them is to describe his chief Gabe, he simply explains that he is

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<sup>11</sup> Pittsburg State University, 'Some Issues in Postcolonial Theory'  
<<http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/postcol.php>> [accessed 29 April 2009]

two things; white and male (373). This shows Gabe`s position at the hotel compared to the others. Gabe represents the colonial power while the other workers are his and The Imperial`s colonised subjects. English flags in the parts of London populated by Arabs in addition to pictures of English royals, country cottages and a postcard of the Tower of London in the foreigner Fazal`s café, also demonstrate British sovereignty (137-138).

Colonial history is shown through employees at the hotel, especially Suleiman from India, but also through characters who come from countries that might be characterised as former colonies. Benny from Liberia tells the story of his Congolese friend who was imprisoned while his family was murdered because of his political views. Another friend, Kono, became a child soldier, while the former doctor and now commis chef Nikolai from the Soviet Union, was judged a spy and traitor when he discovered that chemicals let out in the water caused birth defects and proceeded to publish his findings. The Ukrainian Olek has a maths degree, but came to England to escape poverty. With his passport taken away from him by his new employers, a shed to live in, small pay checks and no rights, all he wants is to get back to his country of birth. Many of the characters we meet have an education, but have to content themselves with manual labour. They must take any job offered, even though they are underpaid. They have no rights, and have to do the jobs no one else wants. One may argue that they are slaves in a modern British Empire.

These characters represent diaspora, a term used to describe `the combination of migrancy and continued cultural affiliation that characterizes many racial, ethnic and national groups scattered throughout the world` (Ashcroft and more: 425). In *Brick Lane*, this is also highly relevant, and even more obvious. Bangladeshis have moved from their home country and settled in an enclave in London, having to deal with difficulties of different kinds. The expression `liberté, égalité`, is present in both *Alentejo Blue* and *In the Kitchen*, illustrating the liberty and equality that every human being should experience in an ideal world (Ali 2007:

17, Ali 2009: 371). But colonialism is one of the aspects that have prevented this principle.

Feminism is a concept or movement that works for women to have an equal status as men.<sup>12</sup> Feminist criticism is inspired by modern feminist thought. It has developed especially since the 1970s as an arena of discussion about the relations between literature and the socio-cultural subordination borne by women as writers, readers, or even fictional characters within a male-dominated social order (Baldick: 128).

Both *In the Kitchen* and *Brick Lane* can be read as feminist texts. We follow the protagonist Nazneen in *Brick Lane* through numerous difficulties that exist for the simple reason that she is a woman. Her sister Hasina and daughter Shahana also face problems due to this irreversible fact. The protagonist in *In the Kitchen* is not a woman. Still, several women are central in the story, and play important parts. Gabe's life is in many ways based on women as they heavily influence him. Gabe's mother Sally Ann is the first character who affects him. Other women who do the same are Gabe's sister, his girlfriend, and last but not least the prostitute Lena. Some of these women also contribute to Gabe's identity crisis and breakdown.

#### 1.4 Theories of Identity

Monica Ali herself states that the theme of her two novels *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* is identity. She says, 'When you're writing about a character you spend a lot of time thinking about who this person is and what makes them the way that they are, in other words, thinking about identity'. When writing *In the Kitchen*, identity was fundamental to Ali:

I was interested (in *In the Kitchen*) to examine a character living in a modern, metropolitan, multicultural, society without any deep-rooted ties (in terms of work,

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<sup>12</sup> Caplex, 'Feminisme' < <http://www.caplex.no/Web/ArticleView.aspx?id=9310197> > [accessed 29 April 2009]

family, community), who thinks he is perfectly adept at living in that world, and then to pile the pressure on him in order to strip him down to his bare essentials. (Correspondence with Monica Ali, 22 April 2010).

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* describes identity as 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is' (Soanes and more 2004: 707). I will apply the well-known psychoanalyst Erik Homburger Erikson's theories about identity in this thesis. Homburger Erikson was born in Germany in 1902. He started training as a psychoanalyst from 1927, and specialised in child psychology under Anna Freud, the daughter of Sigmund Freud. He emigrated to the United States in 1933, and started teaching at Harvard.<sup>13</sup> In his books, he raises questions about both identity and identity crisis. He stresses that he uses the word crisis in a developmental sense, and claims that an identity crisis is a normal and necessary part of human life. An identity is not static; it is in constant change. In *Identity. Youth & Crisis*, he presents eight stages of psychosocial development (94), 'Each stage becomes a crisis because incipient growth and awareness in a significant part function [sic] goes together with a shift in instinctual energy and yet also causes specific vulnerability in that part' (95). The first step is Trust vs. Mistrust, current in an infant stage of life. Here, the baby develops a sense of trust towards its caregivers, or a sense of mistrust if he or she finds them to be unreliable. The second step is Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt in a toddler stage, followed by Initiative vs. Guilt, and Industry vs. Inferiority. In the toddler stage, the child tries to develop independence. Success leads to autonomy, failure to shame and doubt. On the third level, the child explores its own control over the surroundings, trying to make plans. The fourth step is reached approximately as the child enters school, and lasts until puberty. Here, the child begins comparing itself with others, and meets demands. These lead to industry or inferiority.

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<sup>13</sup> Encyclopedia.com, 'Erik Erikson' < [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Erik\\_Erikson.aspx](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Erik_Erikson.aspx) > [accessed 22 January 2010]

Homburger Erikson calls the fifth and most relevant step in this context, Identity vs. Identity confusion. Adolescents will reach it as they search to find themselves, as we will see in the cases of Nazneen, Shahana and Tariq in *Brick Lane*, as well as in *In the Kitchen*'s Asif and Amir, Bailey and Harley. But if one's personal exploration fails at this point, the person will become insecure and confused, lonely and isolated. One may argue that this is the case when it comes to Nazneen's sister Hasina who does not go through a breakdown, but never settles, always feeling unsure.

Gabe in *In the Kitchen* also has to deal with identity confusion. Homburger Erikson's psychosocial step seven, Generativity vs. Stagnation, can be applied here. To be productive and involved is important to people during this stage. If this fails, the outcome is stagnation. Homburger Erikson calls his sixth step Intimacy vs. Isolation where nurture and creation are important, and the last one Integrity vs. Despair. Here, reflection of a life already lived is crucial.<sup>14</sup>

Other issues that Homburger Erikson writes about and which are relevant in this thesis are womanhood and race in addition to youth. These matters have their own strengths. I will come back to this when relevant.

But what is British identity? This question is significant in relation to both *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* as almost all the characters strive to find an identity. Nazneen, the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, is torn between her Bangladeshi background and her new identity in London. *In the Kitchen*'s Gabe is English living in London, but still faces problems related to his British personality, and nearly all the other characters are foreigners.

According to *Contemporary British Identity. English Language, Migrants and Public Discourse*, it is hard to describe England's national identity. Anne J. Kershner writes in the

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<sup>14</sup> About.com, 'Erikson's Psychosocial Stages Summary Chart. Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development' <[http://psychology.about.com/library/bl\\_psychosocial\\_summary.htm](http://psychology.about.com/library/bl_psychosocial_summary.htm)> [accessed 12 April 2010]



foreword that its construction is a complex fusion of culture, demographics, economics, politics and mythology (1). There are many Britains and many British cultural identities (Storry and more: xix).

Due to the waves of immigration, the focus on British identity has become more and more apparent. A result of the new people settling, is for many people the creation of a division between 'us' and 'them', the white population and the immigrant newcomers, 'Negative images, stereotypical and pejorative public representations of minority ethnic groups are known to contribute to a sense of alienation and low self-esteem among members of these communities' (Julios: 10). Because of fears of cultural and linguistic fragmentation, the importance of a British national identity is now stressed. The previous celebration of Britain's multiculturalism has given way to a new emphasis on conformity. Today, the government wants the country's new inhabitants to integrate into mainstream society:

Not only do prospective British citizens need to display sufficient knowledge of life in Britain, its culture and civic institutions; they are expected to take a citizenship oath and make a pledge of allegiance at a public ceremony. Most significantly, those wishing to take up British nationality will have to be able to speak English. (135)

Gabe's father Ted is deeply worried about the English nationality as he desperately tries to preserve it. He thinks that the country's identity disappeared when much of its production stopped. Ted himself lost his pride and identity together with his job when the mill where he had been working his whole life closed down. Mike Storry and Peter Childs state that a national identity in Britain is being brought to light and debated:

Even within organisations such as the National Trust there is discussion about whether to preserve in aspic the many British stately homes and gardens, or whether it would be better to modernise and update 'our heritage' by preserving elements across the range of British culture, including mines, textile mills and wartime bunkers. Others

see British culture (rather than heritage) as being in a constant process of evolution and being far more about the present than the past. (34)

To Ted who has identified himself with his work a whole lifetime, it is difficult to know who he is without his job. How can one form an individual identity separately from the national identity when the nation's own is under pressure and as he sees it almost gone? To Gabe's grandmother Nana, keeping the country British is also essential, "What I don't understand is," said Nana, "why they make such a fuss? The Pakistans, the Asians, or what have you – always on about something, aren't they, complaining about this and that" (170),

'Now what's all this? What they showing now? Why don't they just give over, these Muslims? Protesting this and that'. No, it's a parade, Nana. An Eid festival, earlier this year, right here in Blantwistle. I think they've gone over to the local stations'. Look how they've blocked the road, ' said Nana. 'There'll be no traffic down here today. It's dreadful, in't it? It is'. Nana clacked disapprovingly on her sweet. 'I was saying to Gladys only today, I said, Gladys, how is it these Pakistans take over all them houses, buy up the whole bloomin' street, and you know, they've not a mortgage between them, they club together, that's what, though how they get the money I do not know'. (303)

Claiming not to be a racist, Nana seems to be afraid that she will lose her identity like Ted. The new changes in society make her fear for her own and Britain's uniqueness.

Christina Julios concludes in *Contemporary British Identity. English Language, Migrants and Public Discourse* that in addition to the English language, the country's long tradition of democratic and civil liberties and its national institutions and cultural heritage, define its identity. But this will change according to how the society develops and is transformed (160-161). Gerry Smyth also stresses the importance of the ability to speak English in *British Cultural Identities*. He claims that one of the most important ways that ethnic groups identify themselves is through language:

Not only is language the principal conveyor of symbols, ideas and beliefs which are of importance to the ethnic group; very often language becomes a powerful possession in itself, something to be protected and preserved as the main badge of ethnic identity. (245)

This is evident both in *Brick Lane* through the character Chanu, the husband of Nazneen, and through *In the Kitchen*'s Gabe and his father. While Chanu forbids Nazneen and his daughters to speak English, at least at home, Ted in the same way identifies himself through how he speaks. Living in the fictional town of Blantwistle in northern England, Ted is proud of his dialect as it forms an important part of who he is. But his son Gabe on the other hand, no longer uses the dialect. As I will argue later in this thesis, Gabe eventually faces great problems related to identity as he becomes utterly confused about himself. One may argue that Gabe has lost his true self, or at least the person he used to be, partly due to his change of dialect into what now seems to be a standardized received pronunciation.

Mike Storry and Peter Childs, editors of *British Cultural Identities*, agree with Julios when it comes to the changes that will take place, changes that will affect the British identity. Storry and Childs also state the self-evident fact that identity is closely linked to society. When the social order alters, the common British distinctiveness does too (3-6), 'We used to know what it meant to be British', Ted points out and shows that changes in society can cause insecurity when it comes to national identity (281). But do changes lead to a non-identity? Gabe's answer is in the negative when he and his friend Fairweather discuss their country's identity:

'What's interesting, Gabriel, is the way in which the idea of Britishness is or has become essentially about a neutral, value-free identity. It's a non-identity, if you like. A vacuum'. 'I don't see it,' said Gabe. 'I don't feel like that'. (282)

I will apply several of these described theories in relation to the novels *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* and its characters later in this thesis.

## Chapter 2: The novel *Brick Lane*

### 2.1 Introduction

Brick Lane is a non-fictional street in the borough Tower Hamlets in London`s East End. In his book *Salaam Brick Lane. A Year in the New East End*, the journalist Tarquin Hall writes about the street, his experiences in the neighbourhood and the people living there. Hall gives another and in my opinion useful perspective on the area that supplements that provided by Ali`s novel.

Hall moves to the East End after living abroad for ten years - actually to find his own identity - and comes back to an area completely new to him. He describes this part of London as dirty and worn-out; the houses are abandoned and covered in graffiti, there are prostitutes, alcoholics and homeless people. There are no signs of nature as there are no trees nor green grass anywhere. Drug dealing and fights are a daily part of life in Brick Lane. Hall also portrays the street as foreign since posters and even the street signs are written in one of the Bangladeshi languages. According to Hall, more than 50 000 Bangladeshis were living in Brick Lane and the area called Banglatown when he was staying there in 2005, and 102 different languages were spoken. This part of London has been inhabited by the poor since the Roman Period when it was used as a graveyard and landfill. When the area later became the city`s leading industrial district, the first immigrants arrived. French Huguenots escaped their home country in the 1600s, and silk contributed to their survival in London`s East End. Thus, Brick Lane has associations to immigration and religion that go back centuries. Since Brick Lane became an industrial area, poverty, crime and unemployment have contributed to 80 per cent of the inhabitants living in flats owned by the government.

Hall writes that he also feels lonely due to the non-existence of a feeling of

community. He feels like an immigrant, and the immigrants themselves do not want to assimilate, keeping a distance to the English 'natives' and isolating themselves within their own groups with their own countrymen.

Racism was especially visible in the late 1970s and in 1993 when the British National Party won a seat in the Isle of Dogs. The fight was between white racists and Bangladeshis (Hall 2005).

Julios states that '... Bangladeshi newcomers often arrive in Britain with low levels of educational attainment and professional skills, high levels of illiteracy and poverty as well as lack of English language proficiency' (40).

The novel *Brick Lane* is the story about the 18-year-old Bangladeshi girl Nazneen who is sent off to England to marry Chanu, a man she has never met in her life, and who is much older than her. Life in London is dramatically different compared to the one Nazneen knows from her home country. Having to adapt to this new and unknown life, Nazneen meets obstacles and challenges. A troubled quest for identity starts, and she eventually changes, and her identity develops. My focal point in this part of the thesis will be on this identity forged by Nazneen's new life and situation in an unfamiliar country and culture, and on how she handles her unaccustomed everyday life. As already mentioned, I will analyse this through the themes of life, death and loneliness.

Nazneen's plight will be compared to that of other important women characters in the novel. One of them is Hasina. Hasina is Nazneen's younger sister, and we get to know her through the letters she sends Nazneen. Hasina is described as extremely pretty:

Nazneen told her everything. About Hasina and her heart-shaped face, her pomegranate-pink lips and liquid eyes. How everyone stared at her, women and men and children, even when Hasina was only six years old. And how the older woman began to say, even before she turned eleven, that such beauty could have no earthly purpose but trouble. (50)

At the age of sixteen, Hasina elopes from her Bangladeshi village with the nephew of the sawmill owner. But fate does not make life easy for Hasina. She is thrown between men treating her badly:

As she cleaned the bathroom the next day, Nazneen thought of Hasina. Fate, it seemed, had turned Hasina's life around and around, tossed and twisted it like a baby rat, naked and blind, in the jaws of a dog. And yet Hasina did not see it. (340)

There are other women facing difficulties in *Brick Lane* as well. Monju, Aleya, Jorina and Amina all have to deal with being both a woman and a foreigner, while Nazneen's friend Razia seems to represent the modern, feminist, Westernised woman Nazneen eventually becomes. Razia does not care about what other people think; she dresses in a Union Jack sweatshirt, a symbol of being a modern woman who has adapted to a new culture and society. She keeps on wearing it in spite of Bangladeshis gossiping about her becoming too English, and even after being spat on (368). She tells Nazneen about all the positive sides of England. English people are nice and polite at the same time as they stay out of your business. The state gives you money and help when needed. Razia turns out to be one of the most outstanding, smart and colourful characters of the novel, if not the strongest one.

To Nazneen's daughter Shahana, life is not that easy either. Shahana is torn between her parents' culture, and the only one she truly knows: the English. On the one hand, Shahana is supposed to learn English in school. At the same time, her father forbids her to use the language at home. She is afraid that her father will finally decide that they will move back to Bangladesh. Shahana acts like she is embarrassed by her family background. She embraces the Western customs for young people, wanting to have a tattoo and a piercing, and to dress in short skirts. She even refuses to eat Bangladeshi food, and reacts to her father's restrictions with fury, refusing to obey him or Nazneen, and behaving badly towards her younger sister

(292). According to Julios, such problems are common in homes with second-generation UK-born immigrants. Because the values, languages, cultural traditions, religions and ethnic identities at home and at school are so dissimilar, the children easily acquire dual identities and question who they are and who they want to be (12-13), 'By being brought up in a bicultural and bilingual environment, second generation UK-born immigrants are torn apart between simultaneous but incompatible desires, realities and drives` (13). Homburger Erikson claims that identity formation is really a generation issue when dealing with the young (29-30). This issue may lead to further difficulties between father and daughter. According to Homburger Erikson, a child also looks for models by which to measure himself, and seeks happiness in trying to resemble them (46-47). But in *Brick Lane* it is difficult for Shahana and Razia`s son Tariq to find such a model because they are torn between two very different cultures. They do not know whether they belong to and should choose an English or a Bangladeshi model, and are affected by both societies. This leads to further confusion. In addition, they have both reached Homburger Erikson`s fifth stage of psychosocial development; Identity vs. Identity confusion (94). Trust in oneself and in others is crucial to adolescents at this stage (128-129). As Shahana fears she will be sent back to Bangladesh or that she will be a victim of an arranged marriage, trust becomes an issue. This also goes for Tariq who struggles with drug problems which he does not dare to tell his mother about. Tariq and Shahana`s personal problems become the source for identity confusion. According to Homburger Erikson, 'The adolescent process, however, is conclusively complete only when the individual has subordinated his childhood identifications to a new kind of identification, achieved in absorbing sociability and in competitive apprenticeship with and among his age mates` (155).

Storry and Childs describe identity as two things. The first one is who people take themselves to be, and the second who other people take them to be (6). Homburger Erikson



agrees in his *Identity. Youth and Crisis*, writing about the two views (22-23). Julios also claims that our identity is affected by other people. Our sense of self depends on how we look at ourselves in addition to how others look at us:

A second-generation English-speaking Bangladeshi child brought up in the East End of London, for example, may see themselves as being wholly British; however it is unlikely that the rest of the indigenous white British population may regard them as being 'one of them'. (9)

This is exactly what happens to Shahana. She is born and raised in England, and has never been to Bangladesh. In many ways, she feels British. But because the white majority in British society in addition to her parents together with the Bangladeshi immigrant community she is part of do not see her as an English girl, it is difficult for Shahana to adapt. She does not know which identification label to put on as she is influenced by how others see her. Religion is also of concern to Shahana. Edmund Cusick writes in *British Cultural Identities* that:

For their children, who have grown up in Britain, however, Islam is a cultural and religious force in its own right, so that many young Britons of Asian origin may think of themselves as British Muslims, rather than as Asians or as black Britons. [...] For this generation the challenge is to continue to find ways to integrate the religious traditions of Islam into contemporary British life and to create a new British Islamic identity. (291)

Because of this, it is hard for second generation young Muslims to find an identity. The characters Shahana and Tariq are both fictionally described as belonging to this group. To them, it is hard to find a true self as they have to combine both the British and the Bangladeshi religions and cultures. They have to find out about who they are, based on two different worlds.

## 2.2 Life, Death and Loneliness

Life, death and loneliness are introduced as themes in *Brick Lane* right from the start. In the beginning of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is born. But she is not breathing, leaving everyone to think at first that she is dead. Early in the novel, Nazneen's father Hamid asks his daughter if she wants to see the picture of the man she is going to marry. The 18-year-old girl is soon sent off to England and London to a man much older than herself. A hawk foreshadows her future before she leaves; the bird flies against the sky, but shrinks into nothing, a symbol of what will happen to Nazneen. As a woman in a new country she will in many ways disappear like the bird. The concept of death is also described in relation to this episode as the villagers are in the process of burying their dead and looking for bodies after a tornado. In addition, a hut is portrayed as lying in the middle of a paddy. Due to the natural disaster, the hut '... looked wrong: embarrassed, sliding down at one side, trying to hide' (17). This is also a symbol of the new life the protagonist will have to deal with. Nazneen's future does not look very bright.

When the young bride arrives in London, her life is turned completely upside down. The new everyday life is not anything like her old one. From living an active life in the village of Gouripur, Nazneen is now spending her days in a flat in Brick Lane, London. She makes time pass by doing her household chores and looking out of the window. The only contact she has with people other than Chanu, her husband, is when she waves at the 'tattoo lady' living across from Nazneen. This lady becomes a symbol of loneliness and the life Nazneen is living. The woman is described as having a look of boredom, and is like the protagonist always alone when she appears at the window. Questions are raised about the woman in the novel: 'How can she just sit and sit? What is she waiting for? What is there to see?' (87). This also goes for Nazneen. What can she do with her life living in a strange culture? When the tattoo lady disappears from her window, Nazneen is told that she was sent to an institution,

and is confronted with the question about why nobody acted when they saw her just sitting there. This woman is also an example of the sad side to British life as people are left alone without anyone bothering about them. The British are not nosy about their neighbours, something that Nazneen actually enjoys because it gives her privacy. She finds the English ignorance positive as a contrast to the Bangladeshi gossiping.

There are several other women experiencing even greater problems adapting to the new society than Nazneen. On one level, for Nazneen, they represent the variety of possibilities for immigrants concerning how to choose to live their new lives. Some assimilate quickly, while some do not manage to adapt at all. A woman has supposedly committed suicide by jumping out of her window. Nazneen pictures the woman smiling when jumping because by her act, she defied everyone. This may show Nazneen's thoughts about her new life; she understands why the woman had to do what she did. As a woman she may not have been able to make many decisions in her life, but now she has finally made an individual choice.

Life and death thus play an important part in the novel. On one of her first days in Britain, Nazneen cuts her finger when chopping onions: 'The drops slid together like mercury and rolled down the drain. How long would it take to empty her finger of blood, drop by drop? How long for the arm? And for the body, an entire body?' (24). In connection with this passage, Nazneen describes how lonely she feels. She misses people and has never been alone before. Back in the village there were always people everywhere. Her new life is quite the opposite. The thoughts of Nazneen when she starts bleeding may show her own reflections about suicide. Even though she never directly shows that she wants to end her life, the passage tells the reader about her ideas. Because she feels so lonely and lost in her new world, she has also lost her grip on how to handle everyday life. By emptying her entire body of blood, she would not have to worry about this anymore. She has an option, and by not

committing suicide she actually decides to look at the bright sides of her new life which she eventually starts to enjoy.

Nazneen is shown to have some of the same thoughts through the use of the symbol of the wardrobe. Throughout the novel, this black wardrobe in the bedroom is troubling Nazneen. She compares it to a sin, and keeps dreaming about it. In one of her dreams, she is locked inside it as it falls down and crushes her. The closet is almost like a coffin, and represents death in the novel. Nazneen also says that she hates the wardrobe, but that this fact has not made any impression on her husband Chanu (72). I find this to be a symbol of Nazneen's loneliness. She is alone and locked inside a place where she does not wish to be. And even though this is a thing she really does not want to be a part of her life, it remains. Nothing changes, and as a woman Nazneen is unable to do anything about it. It seems like the wardrobe represents the changes never made in the protagonist's life. It was not her decision to move to England, and she cannot change it. Nazneen also describes her feeling of being trapped several times in the novel. As she has no choices, even if a hurricane arrives, she cannot move (101). Nazneen is in many ways imprisoned in her community. It is not until the last part of the novel and the wardrobe is sold, that Nazneen's problems seem to come to an end.

In addition to the already mentioned hawk in Nazneen's village, other birds are symbols in the novel as well. Nazneen dreams about her aunt's bird that everyone thinks will fly away, but never does. Someone eventually breaks its neck for it to never leave. Because it is dead, it is now trapped forever (217-218). Another bird described never leaves. Nazneen's sister Hasina tells it to fly away. Like herself, it should leave for a better future (335).

The line between life and death is further described in Ali's novel. Though not verified, it appears that Nazneen's mother Rupban committed suicide too. Being a woman in Bangladesh certainly is not easier than being a woman in England. In a letter, Hasina writes

that their mother threatened to kill herself if her husband took another wife. From a feminist point of view, the reason why Rupban acted in the way she did is obvious. Living in a marriage that includes other wives may lead to merciless difficulties and a feeling of loneliness. Her crying is described in several episodes of the novel. Homburger Erikson is quite straightforward about the role of the mother in his *Identity. Youth and Crisis*:

These mothers love, but they love desperately and intrusively. They are themselves so hungry for approval and recognition that they burden their young children with complicated complaints, especially about the fathers, almost pleading with them to justify their mothers' existence by their existence. They are highly jealous and highly sensitive to the jealousy of others. (177)

Still, this description may be applied to the relationship between Nazneen and her mother in *Brick Lane*. Rupban does not explicitly show her jealousy, but she fears her husband will take other wives. She also constantly reminds her daughter Nazneen of what happened when she was born, and that it is because of her own wise decision not to take the baby to the hospital that Nazneen is alive. Rupban also often asks Nazneen if she is still glad she came back to life. What she does is what Homburger Erikson writes about: she wants the daughter to justify the mother's existence by her own existence. As we shall see, this is also relevant for Gabe and his mother in *In the Kitchen*, which I will comment on in the next chapter.

Men are also portrayed in relation to death. Chanu tells his wife about a man killing himself over a girl while Nazneen wonders about a man from her childhood who committed suicide. When Nazneen as a child runs into a man hanging from a tree being punished for kidnapping a little girl, she gets to decide over life and death. She can free the man in desperate need by untying him as he asks her to do, or she can leave him to his destiny. In some ways, Nazneen faces the same problem when her baby boy is rushed to the hospital where he eventually dies. After the tragedy of Nazneen's son, her mother appears in a dream

saying that Nazneen killed her own child because she interfered with fate by bringing him to the doctors. She had the possibility not to do this, and is therefore suffering due to her own choice. She chose to do the opposite of what Rupban did with her newborn daughter.

According to her mother, she chose death over life. At one point, Nazneen also believes that she killed her friend Razia's husband by momentarily forcing death away from her son.

The concept of death which appears several times in the novel may indicate that in life, and especially in Nazneen's, everything can happen. Life is unpredictable for everyone, but to the people moving from one country to another, the outcome may be especially hard to accept because of the cultural differences.

Nazneen is not the only person feeling lonely in Ali's novel. The readers are told about her sister Hasina's life in Bangladesh through the letters they send to each other. Even though she is living in her own country, Hasina has to handle a difficult and often lonely life. At the age of sixteen, she elopes with a boy from the village and enters into a 'love marriage'. But soon her life consists of rape, prostitution and abuse by different men. In many ways, the young Hasina accepts this life saying that it is a woman's own fault if she is beaten. At the same time, Hasina never gives up finding her identity as she struggles towards a new and better life, leaving her old ones behind. Nazneen dreams about becoming as independent as her sister (93-94).

Through the letters from Bangladesh, the issue of physical abuse of women is also raised. Hasina tells Nazneen about her friend Monju who is in hospital because her husband and his siblings poured acid on her and her son whom they wanted to sell. There are many cruel fates for the women in the novel, especially for those still living in Bangladesh. These women have not physically moved to another place, but I find the scattering in relation to diaspora relevant here as well. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin describe this scattering as something that 'leads to a splitting in the sense of home' in their book *The Post-Colonial*

*Studies Reader* (425). In my opinion, the concept of home can be discussed. Hasina is still living in the country where she was born, but does this mean that she is not experiencing this splitting in the sense of a home? My answer in the negative may not be in accordance with the traditional interpretation of the concept of diaspora, but I find Hasina`s case to be almost as relevant in this regard as her sister`s. After eloping, Hasina does not have a real home either. She claims to be happy, but reveals through the letters that men treat her badly. Her first husband beats her, and she leaves their home to find another domicile which is far less expensive. Its owner, Mr Chowdhury, treats Hasina in an extremely degrading way as well. When she is fired from her job because she finds a friend in one of her male colleagues, she has to find a new place to live. Hasina, now a prostitute, marries one of her customers and moves in with him, but this husband is no better than the first one. Again, Hasina has to escape and finally finds a family to live with as their employee. In the end of the novel, we get to know that Hasina has eloped once again.

I cannot say that Hasina after leaving her father`s house ever has a real home. She finds places to stay, but not places where she can settle and which she can call her own. Throughout the novel, she is lonely because she never finds this home. Having shamed the family, there is no way back. Looking at it like this, I find diaspora to apply to Hasina as well as people moving to another country. One of them is Nazneen who actually eventually makes a home for herself and her family in England.

### 2.3 The Women in *Brick Lane*

As already mentioned, *Brick Lane* may be read as a feminist text. In this analysis I will relate the Bangladeshi women, their culture, how they act and how they are treated to this literary and cultural theory.

The many women in *Brick Lane* play important parts as the narrative in many ways is based on the women's lives. They are portrayed through suicides, arranged marriages, violence, polygamy and prostitution. Women in this Bangladeshi enclave in London are not allowed to work, and are judged according to whether they are demure enough in terms of their clothes and behaviour. It is not so much England that gets in their way as the sexism brought from Bangladesh that they have to handle. The Bangladeshis who have settled in this part of London are living in a small enclave within the English community, where Bangladeshi rules are still valid.

Nazneen manages to survive her new life and oppression by doing small comic and subversive things to contradict her husband. She drops his promotion from her prayers, mixes up his files, puts chillies in his sandwiches and places unwashed socks back in his drawers.

Suppression is further portrayed in the novel through indications which may not seem very significant at first sight. The first one is evident in the opening of the novel when Nazneen is born to her father's disappointment: he wanted a boy (14). When Nazneen's baby dies, her sister writes her a letter where she wishes Nazneen to have more sons (149). The differences between men and women are clearly shown through poor Hasina. As already mentioned, she states that it is a woman's own fault if she says something she is not allowed to and for that reason is beaten by a man (25). She later writes to Nazneen, 'I do my best but I am only a woman' (163).

The husband of Nazneen's friend Razia puts together dolls. They are delivered to him in many parts, on a symbolic level just like the women of Ali's narrative (73). The women never feel whole as they suffer oppression. But surviving is about learning how to take the differences and make them strengths (Minh-Ha 2006: 246). This is what Nazneen eventually does when the novel ends. Her identity develops independently despite male domination. A sign of this can be seen through the symbol of ice skating. When Nazneen watches what she



calls ice e-skating on television for the first time, she is completely astonished. What she sees the female ice skater do, in many ways represents what she wants, and also eventually gains in life:

She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (36)

But Nazneen also sees the limitations of women and herself through the ice skating:

Nazneen stared at the television. There was a close-up of the woman. She had sparkly bits around her eyes like tiny sequins glued to her face. Her hair was scarped back and tied on top of her head with plastic flowers. Her chest pumped up and down as if her heart would shoot out and she smiled pure, gold joy. She must be terrified, thought Nazneen, because such things cannot be held, and must be lost. (37)

In Nazneen's world, happiness does not last. Therefore, she sees the ice skating as something fake, just like the skater's flowers. Still, she continues to watch it, but with mixed feelings:

For a whole week it was on every afternoon while Nazneen sat cross-legged on the floor. While she sat, she was no longer a collection of hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white, light glory.

But when it ended and she switched off the television, the old Nazneen returned. For a while it was a worse Nazneen than before because she hated the socks as she rubbed them with soap, and dropped the pottery tiger and elephant as she dusted them and was disappointed when they did not break. She was glad when the ice e-skating came no more. (41)

When Nazneen watches the television and the skating, she feels like another Nazneen. This new Nazneen is the Nazneen she becomes at the end of the novel, but the new Nazneen is hard to accept because of the sexism that controls both the society in Brick Lane, and in

Bangladesh. Eventually, however, Nazneen starts imagining that she is an ice skater herself. When she starts her relationship with Karim, a young Bangladeshi she meets when she begins repairing and sewing clothes he brings her from his uncle's sweatshop, she pictures the two of them as skaters (220). Nazneen also becomes more and more aware of her looks. One day, she tries on Chanu's trousers and imagines herself with a handbag (141). The novel ends with Nazneen's two daughters and Razia taking her to go ice skating. Nazneen's identity has changed as she now acts a lot more freely:

In front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath. A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs. 'Here are your boots, Amma'. Nazneen turned round. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there. She said, 'But you can't skate in a sari'. Razia was already lacing her boots. 'This is England', she said. 'You can do whatever you like'. (492)

The ice skating represents escaping – from reality with the help of the television, and from a life controlled by others. At this moment, the scars in the ice are accepted parts of life. Nazneen understands that she can go on by herself despite what has happened in the past. As the ice reveals itself, Nazneen also apprehends her own opportunities in her new life. The colours that shift and change, show that life varies, but the ice's unchanging nature represents the stability that always lies beneath. The boards bounding the ice may symbolise one of the many obstacles and hindrances Nazneen faces in England. But as she decides to go on the ice, the barrier does no longer exist. The clothing also has a symbolic meaning. The ice skating woman wears jeans, not a skirt like the women Nazneen has seen on television. At the same time, Nazneen is going to skate in her sari. Because they are in England, women can choose what to do themselves. Nazneen chooses to keep her sari, and also Bangladeshi traditions and

culture, at the same time as she adjusts to her new country. Finally, she is not dependent on men anymore.

## 2.4 Identity and Diaspora

*Brick Lane* deals mainly with identity and diaspora. Chanu who is a relatively educated man with a job, encounters difficulties dealing with everyday life in London. Nazneen, considering her gender, young age and background, is the one who in the end succeeds despite her husband's strictures.

I have earlier in this thesis written about diaspora. In relation to *Brick Lane*, this is highly relevant. Nazneen has to deal with and settle in a culture completely different from the one she was born into, and thus feels extremely lonely. She does not know the social codes in England - a result of being both a woman and a Bangladeshi. Even though she wants to take courses to learn the English language, her husband denies her this, saying that there is no point. Chanu himself stresses the high importance of education, something that makes his decisions concerning his wife self-contradictory. As a man, he wants to control his wife as he is afraid of what the other Bangladeshis in the community will say about him. Christina Julios writes about the importance of education and learning the language in the new country. To speak English is a part of the British identity (14-15). But when immigrants gather together in small societies in their new country, the need to know the new language is not always that clear:

Such population movements into the UK have resulted in the development of large enclaves of minority ethnic linguistic settlements in certain urban and metropolitan areas across the country. London, for instance, has become home to the largest concentration of Sylheti-speaking Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom and anywhere outside Bangladesh.... (15)

This is what happens in *Brick Lane*, and assimilation becomes difficult. In addition, lack of English proficiency contributes to high rates of academic underachievement and school dropouts (15).

Loneliness is also closely related to identity almost throughout the novel. Nazneen has trouble finding her true self and her personality in the new country. Loneliness contributes to insecurity which contributes to difficulties concerning identity. Living back in Bangladesh, Nazneen did not have the same need to consciously create her own individuality as it formed itself automatically. In England, this need is much more visible; Nazneen has to fit in with her new country and culture, but also with her new husband and the Bangladeshi community in London. She has to learn to live in a completely new way.

The cultural differences Nazneen faces are many. First of all, she meets a new culture through her husband Chanu whom her father has found for her. Problems of communication soon arise. Nazneen does not know a single word of English when she arrives, but the problems are not only linguistic ones. Nazneen does not understand what her husband means when he is talking about his philosophy and quoting different British poets. She does not understand precisely what he does for a living. When he talks about his upcoming promotion, books and his different projects, he talks as if his wife were not present. Really, Chanu talks to no other person than himself.

Nazneen is surprised by the things she sees in her new country. She cannot understand why women care about such things as slimming their dogs, for instance. In Bangladesh, such shallow preoccupations did not exist, and being skinny could be a sign of poverty. However, in many ways Nazneen enjoys the fact that the English mind their own business. As already mentioned, this is a contrast to what she is used to. Still, she finds this to be positive even though it also contributes to a distance between the two cultures. When Nazneen gives birth to her first child, a boy named Raqib, Mrs. Islam, by some thought to be the most respectable old

Bangladeshi neighbour, tries to control how Nazneen raises him. This is when Nazneen starts to really appreciate the English reserve as she dreads Mrs. Islam`s visits.

Within Nazneen`s own culture, there is a lot of gossiping and rumours. The Bangladeshi women help each other out, but if someone stands out as different, she is easily banned from the group. Becoming too English, wearing make-up, working outside the home or standing out in any way, is looked upon as a deadly sin. In other words, to form a strong and independent identity, is taboo. According to the women themselves, mixing with people with different backgrounds and religions can make the Bangladeshis lose their own. Apparently, it is not as unproblematic as it may seem to talk to and trust the women in the community, not even a good friend. Nazneen needs to tell someone about her lover Karim because of her confusion: ‘A few times she had imagined conversations with Razia. She played them out, reading both parts, trying a new phrase here and there. [...] They did not speak of him. It was not possible` (393).

Nazneen also encounters difficulties when she understands that Razia`s son Tariq has drug problems. She wants to tell her friend, but does not dare. In the 1990s, when large parts of the story take place, drugs were fairly common among young people in the UK. More than 50 per cent of the youth population were estimated to have tried at least one illegal drug before turning 18 (Childs and more: 187). But Tariq does not try dope only once. In addition to selling drugs, he has to pay what can be called taxes to other dealers who want to take over his area. To be able to do this, Tariq, now an addict, sells off his mother`s furniture. Razia finally realises this without anyone telling her, even though the women in the enclave have gossiped about it for a long time.

One of her first months in England, Nazneen decides to go outside. She meets many people, none of them interested in or even aware of her. She keeps on walking until she is overwhelmed by the feeling of being lost, both symbolically and literally. By taking a walk in

an area completely unknown to Nazneen, it seems like she is trying to run away from everything: her flat, her husband, her identity and her new life. This is a turning point in the novel as she eventually receives a kind of revelation when she makes herself understood by a stranger. For the first time, Nazneen has talked to someone in English. The day started out badly with a panic attack, but ended up with Nazneen understanding that her new life can work out. She can make it on her own, without any help from a man. She does not have to feel lost like the majority of the women in *Brick Lane* do.

Hall claims that identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think. In his article 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', he writes that identity is a production which is never complete and always in process (47). His statement corresponds with how I see Nazneen's identity. In England, Nazneen has to handle the new culture and also to be aware of whom she really is in order to adapt. As the story evolves, Nazneen's identity takes form and changes. From being an insecure girl from a Bangladeshi village, Nazneen soon develops in her new town and country. After the incident where she goes for a walk, she starts looking at her existence more positively. There are obstacles in her way, though. One day, Nazneen passes a notice telling her and others that smoking, eating and drinking are not allowed: 'All the signs, thought Nazneen, they only tell you what *not* to do' (64). On a symbolic level, the notice represents the restrictions in Nazneen's life. There are no signs telling her what she actually can do, how to act in her new life and culture.

The overloaded apartment Nazneen and her family live in, also symbolises obstacles Nazneen faces. In addition to the furniture, Chanu keeps and collects so many different things that there is almost no room for the people living there. His items become barriers to Nazneen, both literally and on a symbolic level. The same applies for what happens 11 September 2001. Nazneen, Chanu and their daughters watch the attack on the Twin Towers on television (365-368). The people inside the towers are trapped, just like many of the

characters in *Brick Lane*. Nazneen watches Americans jumping out of the windows, having no other options. This is a symbol of difficulties concerning the novel's characters as well. They are all trapped somewhere most of them do not want to be, and somewhere where they cannot easily form new identities. Even though they want to be free, they are tied up in their own lives without any alternatives. One day, Nazneen passes a roundabout:

She crossed the rasp of land that had once sprouted a playground, a swing and a slide and a roundabout. Now the tarmac was rotten and split, it seemed, by the blades of grass which sucked huge strength from this black grot but wilted on the lawns. Only the roundabout remained. It was fenced around with two layers of grey metal barriers, blocking its chance of escape. (278)

Like the roundabout, Nazneen and many women in *Brick Lane* also face hindrances when it comes to escape. They have to remain, without the chance to break away from their lives. However, the blades of grass represent hope as they sprout up from the tarmac, unaffected by any kind of barrier. Nazneen has a dream about being trapped as well. She feels that she cannot free herself or make decisions on her own (430-431).

Further restrictions are to be found in the novel's title. As already described, Brick Lane is actually a non-fictional street in London's East End largely inhabited by Bangladeshis who migrated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, looking for work.<sup>15</sup> Brick Lane holds a symbolic meaning in the novel. Ali describes bricks several times in her book. Bricks cannot easily be moved, bricks are obstacles. Nazneen's sister Hasina says she hates bricks (169). When water comes through the brick wall in her flat, it represents something that cannot be stopped, just like fate. When Nazneen's son is ill and they are at the hospital, Nazneen starts thinking about brick tombs (117). In relation to this, bricks are barriers as well. The brick tombs may

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<sup>15</sup>Anwar Shahjahan, 'All About Brick Lane, London's Bangla Town' < <http://www.click4bricklane.co.uk/>> [accessed 18.05.09]

represent her son`s death and the difficulties and hindrances in her life the demise will cause. But a woman saying she can break bricks with her gums is also described (151, 153), showing on a symbolic level that bricks can be conquered after all.

Nazneen`s identity is developed through her fascination with Dr Azad`s snowstorms or snowglobes, small containers made of glass filled with water and `snow`. He explains that they are similar to life; if you are strong, you withstand the storm. Everything also settles eventually, including the snow (66, 272). Nazneen seems to find comfort and strength when she is told about these items that take on a symbolic meaning for her.

Not knowing her own identity, Nazneen suffers a breakdown. But in the aftermath, she starts changing, accepting her life. She begins to make decisions on her own, and corrects her husband, something she has never done before. Now, Nazneen seems to want to control her own life for the first time. She shows this by choosing to stay in England with her daughters while Chanu goes back to Bangladesh. She also gets a job, and decides not to marry her lover Karim, saying that now she finally knows what she can do. Her humour and love for her daughters help her in adjusting to her new life.

Nazneen`s sister Hasina also changes during the novel. But in the opposite way to Nazneen. While Nazneen becomes more and more confident and finds an identity to call her own, Hasina`s development seems to make her less self-assured. In the beginning of the narrative, Hasina elopes with a boy, following her own feelings, making her own decisions. But as time passes, she grows to be another Hasina. This Hasina is unsure of who she is, due to how she is treated by the men in her life, `I am a low woman. I am nothing. I have nothing. I am all that I have. I can give you nothing` (171-172).

When Hasina is employed by James and Lovely as a maid, it appears like she finally settles. She believes God has given her a second chance, and finds love in the baby daughter of the family. But the cultural differences are many. Even though Hasina and Lovely are both



Bangladeshi women now living in Dhaka, they are in many ways living in different worlds. Lovely's problems are dissimilar to those of Hasina. Lovely worries about the fact that she has only one cook and one maid. She does not have her own driver, and her house is not the biggest in their street. Hasina fears for the maid next door who is only a young girl, but Lovely is not able to look upon her as a child worker. She says that she wishes she was not beautiful, but plain like Hasina has become (362). Beauty causes problems. Despite their differences, Hasina enjoys her new everyday life. But her insecurity concerning identity shines through as it seems like she actually wants to be Lovely:

*I get up go in master bedroom. Sit at her table and present the face in mirror. It look like a stranger face to me. I take brush. Brush the hair. Take cream. Cream the cheek. Take kohl. Dark the eyes. Take earring. Dress the ear. (362-363, italics in the original)*

Hasina wants to be another person, and has not found her true self. As described, Hasina does not find true happiness this time either. In the last part of the novel, she runs away with the cook. While Nazneen becomes a self-sufficient and strong woman, Hasina is dependent on men right until the end.

Even though he has the privilege of being a man, Nazneen's husband Chanu faces identity problems of his own. He has been in England for sixteen years when Nazneen arrives, but without interacting much with English people and English culture outside of work. Almost throughout the novel, he has two missions that he promises to fulfil: to become a success and then go back home (110, 477). But things do not turn out as Chanu wishes. In spite of the fact that he constantly talks about what he calls his education, his upcoming promotion, his certificates, his different projects and that he refuses to act like a 'primitive' and looks down on people whom he considers to be less intelligent than himself, he does not seem to truly believe in what he is declaring. It looks as if he has to talk about these goals to

make them form his identity. He also desperately tries to teach his girls about how to act, especially concerning religion (215-216). But as he does not practise what he preaches, his daughters do not either.

I have already written about how ethnic groups often identify themselves through their language (Childs and more: 245). This is what the character Chanu does in *Brick Lane*. He forbids his daughters to speak English and his wife to attend English classes, because he wants to protect the family's Bangladeshi identity. Another reason may be that it gives him power and control, though. But the family's language has to be protected and preserved as Chanu is scared that the cultural beliefs and ideas of Bangladesh will disappear with the adoption of the English language. He also shows problems of identity through religion. At the same time as he stresses the importance of Islam, Nazneen notes that he never prays. In addition, Chanu talks about how Bengalis through history also have been Hindus and Buddhists: 'We are only Muslims because of the Moguls. Don't forget' (197). Chanu does not want to send his daughters to the mosque school either. It may seem like he is pretending to be religious because he wants to keep his Bangladeshi identity. According to Nazneen, Chanu's religion is education (260).

Chanu also reveals himself that identity is a concern to him: 'I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is' (113).

But when Chanu's hopes about the future do not succeed, he becomes unsure about who he really is, and eventually also stops talking about the things that were so important to him for many years. Storry states that the British work ethic is very strong (101). To many people, their work represents who they are. Chanu is an example of this. Dispirited by never getting his promotion or being appreciated at work, Chanu gives up his own plans of

becoming a successful man in London, returning to Bangladesh loaded with certificates of different types:

After a while, his voice came again. 'All my certificates here.' He closed the doors. He made a jolly face. 'Shall we sell those too?' 'Take them with you. Take one or two at least.' He inspected her closely. His eyebrows tangled together. In his hand he had one of his framed certificates. 'Can't get mangoes from the amra tree,' he said. Then he sat down on the bed and held his knees. (458)

Chanu's friend Dr. Azad on the other hand, looks more like a man of success, quite similar to the man Chanu strives to become, at least to someone who does not know him. But Azad deals with problems related to identity as well. In many ways, he is a Western man with an education embracing British traditions at the same time as he wishes to stay Bangladeshi.

Nazneen and Chanu are never invited to visit the doctor and his family. So Chanu decides they should accidentally be in the neighbourhood and stop by. The incident makes Nazneen understand why Azad does not want them to come over, and the identity concerns become clearer to the reader at the same time. Azad is ashamed of his wife. She drinks, she belches, she smokes and she swears. She does not mind giving their daughter money to go to the pub; Azad is embarrassed about her way of dressing, and she gives a lesson about how one must accept the fact that the children are getting westernised. In addition, she totally ignores both Chanu's and her husband's opinions on the subject. And how can one form an individual identity when being that affected and controlled by a person living and breathing next to you every day? According to Nazneen, the two make an ill-matched pair. She also realises why Azad so often visits them:

And she knew why the doctor came. Not for the food, not to get away from his purple-clawed woman (although maybe for these things as well), not to share a love of learning, not to borrow books or discuss mobile libraries or literature or politics or art. He came as a man of science, to observe a rare specimen: unhappiness greater than his own. (114-115)

Being unhappy further complicates Azad`s search for identity as insecurity controls his life in several ways. Still, he keeps his hopes up, telling Nazneen about the snowstorms which he compares with life. The snowstorms do not only represent Azad and Nazneen`s problems connected to identity, but also the many people in the novel having to fight. Razia`s son Tariq is one of them as the doctor gives him one of the glass containers when he is trying to get clean from drugs. Like the snow, Tariq`s life will also eventually settle. This also goes for Azad. He finds the snowstorms relaxing and they form an important part of his otherwise sorrowful life. For Tariq and Nazneen, as well as Azad, their identities may stand out clear when the snow finally settles.

I will also briefly comment on Karim in relation to identity as he struggles with this necessity as well. Karim is not described in as detailed a way as Nazneen or Chanu, but the most visible sign of him being unsure about his identity, is his stammering. Nazneen notices that he stammers when speaking in Bengali, but not when he speaks English. She also starts wondering if he actually ever has been in Bangladesh. Is he Bangladeshi or English? Or maybe both? This emphasises Karim`s insecurity, and shows that he struggles to find an identity to call his own, just like most of *Brick Lane`s* characters. Karim is the leader of a political group fighting for Muslim rights and their culture, but ironically without speaking his original language. To most people, he may stand out as having a strong personality, a young man who follows all the traditions from Bangladesh. But the fact is that he seems to be torn between the two cultures as well. He also reveals that he has turned down a girl whom his family found for him because he wants a relationship with Nazneen. What seems to be the truth is not always what it looks like on the outside when it comes to the characters of *Brick Lane*.

Frantz Fanon analyses the legitimacy of the claims of a nation in the article 'On National Culture'. He writes:

The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well-defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro exists. (63)

What Karim does, is the same; he tries to display his people in the new country. He wants to make it obvious that the Bangladeshis are present and that they have their own culture by dressing in traditional clothes and forming a political group. His group does not have many followers, though.

Fanon further remarks:

The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he has no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas that he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation which the men and the women of his country know. (66)

Common for all of the Bangladeshi minority characters living in London, are questions of identity. Erik Homburger Erikson writes about race and the wider identity in *Identity. Youth and Crisis*. Those he calls Negroes are in his view deprived of their identities in the sense of how they are described and looked upon (296-297). I believe this can be applied to the characters of *Brick Lane* as they also in many ways have incomplete identities. They are insecure about who they are, in large part because of the white society's attitudes of indifference towards them. As explained in chapter 2.1, racism is apparent in the community. Maybe not very explicitly shown in the novel, it does affect the characters who become invisible, nameless and faceless to the English majority.

White Englishmen live in a completely different part of town – a completely different world to *Brick Lane*'s characters. To observe this world, Chanu decides to take his family sightseeing after spending thirty years in the city:

'All I saw was the Houses of Parliament. And that was in 1979'. It was a project. Much equipment was needed. Preparations were made. Chanu bought a pair of shorts which hung just below his knees. He tried them on and filled the numerous pockets with a compass, guidebook, binoculars, bottled water, maps and two types of disposable camera. Thus loaded, the shorts hung at mid-calf. He bought a baseball cap and wore it around the flat with the visor variously angled up and down and turned round to the back of his head. A money belt secured the shorts around his waist and prevented them from reaching his ankles. He made a list of tourist attractions and devised a star rating system that encompassed historical significance, something he termed 'entertainment factor' and value for money. (289)

## 2.5 Fate

A belief in fate controls and affects many lives in *Brick Lane*. This leads to problems finding an independent and certain identity as many characters are bound to what they believe to be their destinies. They do not develop as persons because fate determines everything. Fate decides how their lives will turn out, and one cannot stand in the way of fate (Ali 2003: 14),

What could not be changed had to be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was a mantra, fettle and challenge. So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (16)

This passage is taken from the beginning of the book, and is a glimpse of what will happen to Nazneen in England. It also reveals that Nazneen eventually realises that fate cannot control her life. But I have already indicated that right from her birth, fate is fundamental to Nazneen.

The story of 'How You Were Left To Your Fate' tells about the almost stillborn Nazneen who wakes up after her mother has decided not to take her to the hospital, but to submit to fate. The narrative follows Nazneen almost throughout the novel as it is told and retold, and also often enters Nazneen's thoughts. It appears in her dreams as well. In her view, all events of her life, small or big, happen due to fate; her marriage to Chanu, being sent off to London, giving birth to her children, the relationship with Karim, and the question whether she is going back to Bangladesh or not. Nazneen feels like her every move is being constantly watched (254).

Due to changes in her life that bring with them increased confidence and self-esteem, Nazneen slowly starts believing that fate is not that essential after all. This causes her identity to become both apparent and strong. She can make decisions on her own, without the constant interference of thoughts about her destiny:

Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palaces on Bishopsgate, and talk into a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the streets fearless and proud. And if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and a tight bright top, then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin. For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life. (277-278)

At the same time as Nazneen realises that fate cannot control her life, she is also liberated as a woman. She can act more freely, and starts behaving much more independently than earlier. Nazneen is starting to develop an identity of her own, regardless of her husband and other men. One of the first signs of this is when Nazneen begins wondering if it is worth moving back to Bangladesh. In the first part of the novel, her home country is all Chanu speaks about, and all she can think of. But now she questions if she will be able to give up her

life in England with her sink, her toilet and her electric oven (77-78). Her new identity further develops when her baby boy is born. She stands up for herself for the first time in Ali's narrative when she refuses to give the baby to Mrs. Islam. And this growth continues with Nazneen making bigger and bigger decisions, refusing to listen to and depend on other people or fate:

Suddenly her entire being lit up with anger. *I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one.* A charge ran through her body and she cried out again, this time out of sheer exhilaration. (405, italics in the original)

Furthermore, it is a great relief to Nazneen when her sister tells her about their mother's suicide. Clearly, she did not follow her fate either. In the end of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen also admits in front of her daughters that the story of 'How You Were Left To Your Fate' is boring, and at the same time decides that fate cannot control her life anymore (483).

Nazneen's younger sister Hasina is also bound to fate. But as Hasina's personality is different from Nazneen's, the two live lives dissimilar to each other. The letters from Hasina which contain many grammar mistakes, reveal this. While Nazneen is tidy, serious and conscientious, fulfilling her father's expectations, Hasina is more careless and always acts according to what she finds to be the best solution at the time. The fact that Hasina chose to elope and enter into a love marriage, shows the different personalities of the two sisters. While Nazneen was sent to England by her father and followed her fate, Hasina disobeyed her abba, choosing what you might call the Western model. But it is problematic to claim that Hasina did not fulfil what destiny wanted her to as she actually chose to do what she thought was the better solution at that time. I think that both sisters did follow their fate, but in different ways. Nazneen also believes what her sister does is not kicking against fate, but



actually following it (22). I believe the issue to be that since nobody knows what fate is, nobody can truly follow it either.

## 2.6 Love and Happiness

When Nazneen eventually finds her own identity, she does this with the help of love and happiness. By fulfilling these fundamental needs, she finds a stable life in addition to her true self. Nazneen's love for her father is visible in the novel. Since she was a young girl, Nazneen knew she would be married off to a man her father would find for her. She has always been grateful for this. But when she eventually is sent to London and Chanu, Nazneen wonders why her father did this to her. Why did her father want her to marry Chanu? And what would she have done if she had known the marriage would be like this (101)? Nazneen also questions why her father never said goodbye to her before she left (24). By losing her father, Nazneen also loses a part of her identity.

Love between the two sisters Hasina and Nazneen is also evident. But the two of them actually only meet in retrospect. The contact they have as adults, is through the letters. After in many ways losing her father, Nazneen does not seem to find love before her son Raqib is born. And through him, she also starts developing a kind of love for Chanu. Earlier, Nazneen has often been insecure about her thoughts about Chanu and their relationship. Can identification be applied to who you marry? When she first meets him, she has contradictory feelings as she wants to leave at the same time as she wants to stroke him. Nazneen describes Chanu as kind, but fat. He claims to be an intellectual, but in reality he is no such thing. When Raqib is born, she finds the fact that Chanu has helped to make him astonishing. And when their baby boy is rushed to the hospital where he is put in an incubator, the love between husband and wife starts growing. For the first time, Chanu steps up as the responsible spouse

showing that he really cares about his family. Nazneen feels that Chanu now actually really speaks to her, and that she loves him:

Abba did not choose so badly. This was not a bad man. There were many bad men in the world, but his was not one of them. She could love him. Perhaps she did already. She thought she did. And if she didn't, she soon would because now she understood what he was, and why. Love would follow understanding. (120-121)

Her irritation with her husband, instead of growing steadily as it had for three years, began to subside. For the first time she felt that he was not so different. At his core, he was the same as her` (121).

Nazneen writes in a letter to her sister that she suddenly is very happy, even before she knows what will happen to her child (142). Even though the event has a traumatic outcome with the baby dying, it brings Chanu and Nazneen closer to each other, which helps them both in their identity search. When Nazneen later becomes ill, Chanu shows his immense concern for her. He does not want to go to work, he makes Nazneen lovely food, he buys her things, reads out loud to her and shows her ice skating on the television. This trend continues throughout Ali`s novel.

Nazneen`s relationship to Karim helps her form an identity. When she first meets him, she starts showing signs of what will happen between them. She forgets to cover her hair when he is present, which may indicate that she does not care about the so-called rules. She starts comparing him to Chanu, and enjoys the fact that Karim seems to be confident in himself and what he believes in. Nazneen sees this as a contrast to Chanu`s behaviour, but also compares it to herself and Hasina saying that they do not have a place in the world either (260, 264). The fact that Nazneen sees Karim as someone who really acts instead of just talking and talking about it, may be the main reason why she eventually starts the relationship

with him (261).

In many ways, Nazneen makes herself believe that she is in love with Karim. But there are several incidents showing the opposite. When the relationship begins, Nazneen feels that tenderness cannot satisfy her. It may therefore seem like the relationship is not based on feelings, but on sexual urges. She also vomits by thinking of what she has done, and seems to regret it several times (322, 329, 331, 373). In addition, she wants Chanu to find out about the relationship so he can see what kind of wife he has (343, 383-384). When Nazneen in the last part of the novel decides to end it with Karim, he begs her to stay. He has turned down a girl for her sake, and wants the two of them to marry. As Nazneen tells him that she has made her choice, she also realises that what was between them existed because they made each other up (454-455). Nazneen has to form an individual identity without the help and influence of others. By making the life changing decision on her own, Karim has actually helped her on her way to a new personality. Now, she is another person than before she met Karim.

To Karim too, it is easier to create a stable identity when confidence is present. The last time he and his former lover meet, he does not stammer anymore (452-453). He is no longer nervous about meeting Nazneen.

Love is also evident through Nazneen's relationship with her two daughters. The elder daughter Shahana has as already mentioned troubles related to identity. Her fear about going back to Bangladesh complicates her bond to the rest of the family members. But when Nazneen finally decides that she and the girls will stay behind while Chanu leaves for Bangladesh, Shahana also changes. Now, she feels she can be herself, and is not that torn between the culture of her father and the English one. She settles down with her own identity due to love and happiness, but also because of the absence of pressure from her father.

So-called love marriages are taboo according to Bangladeshi traditions, while Western

values condemn arranged marriages. Azad explains about the two in a conversation with Nazneen:

‘What I did not know – I was a young man – is that there are two kinds of love. The kind that starts off big and slowly wears away, that seems you can never use it up and then one day is finished. And the kind that you don’t notice at first, but which adds a little bit to itself every day, like an oyster makes a pearl, grain by grain, a jewel from the sand’. (430)

Living in a very unhappy marriage, Azad tells Nazneen that he and his former girlfriend entered into a love marriage. But the doctor’s dreams about his life with his wife are not fulfilled. Hasina also chooses a love marriage, but this relationship fails as well. Nazneen’s father, on the other hand, finds Chanu for her. Even though Chanu moves back to Bangladesh while Nazneen stays in England, I consider this to be the only reasonably successful marriage among the main characters. Maybe such marriages are not as appalling as many Westerners believe them to be. Maybe Dr. Azad is right, maybe true love can be made from arranged marriages.

Nazneen’s choice to stay in England also makes her happy, despite the fact that Chanu joyfully declares that Bangladesh is ranked the happiest nation on earth (350). Hence, what makes the protagonist truly happy, is to make independent decisions on her own, trusting her own judgements without the influence of other persons.

## 2.7 Concluding Remarks

Nazneen succeeds in finding her own identity. She keeps her Bangladeshi traditions, but assimilates into British society by adopting certain aspects of Western culture. As earlier pointed out, Christina Julios states in *Contemporary British Identity. English Language*,

*Migrants and Public Discourse* that language, employment and education are important parts of becoming English and acquiring an English identity. Nazneen both gets a job and learns the language, and thus finds her British identity and place in London. According to Julios and research by the Equal Opportunities Commission, it is difficult for Bangladeshi women to get jobs compared to their white countrymen. This is the case regardless of education (145-146). But Nazneen acts herself and starts her own business where she sews clothes together with female friends. In *Identity. Youth and Crisis*, Homburger Erikson claims that every human being always acquires both a positive and a negative identity. The type of identity shown is due to different factors in the person's life. At the end of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen shows her positive side because she has found herself and is finally happy with who she is. Homburger Erikson also writes that,

Identity-consciousness is, of course, overcome only by a sense of identity won in action. Only he who 'knows where he is going and who is going with him' demonstrates an unmistakable if not always easily definable unity and radiance of appearance and being. (300)

Nazneen is one who knows where she is going and who is going with her when the narrative comes to an end. She is now a free woman, not dependant on men anymore. She decides to not go back to Bangladesh with her husband Chanu, and she decides to end her relationship with her lover Karim. What Nazneen decides to choose, is herself in addition to her girls and their country England. Ana Bravo-Moreno writes in *Migration, Gender and National Identity. Spanish Migrant Women in London* that a woman can identify herself as belonging to a category rather than a permanent entity (249). This is precisely what Nazneen does when she takes on the role as a self-sufficient woman, a mother, a friend and a worker. She meets many difficulties in her new life, but manages to overcome them. After her breakdown, she actually

grows stronger, just like the protagonist of *In the Kitchen*, Gabe who will be analysed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: The novel *In the Kitchen*

### 3.1 Introduction

Identity through the themes of life, death and loneliness, is relevant in Monica Ali's third novel *In the Kitchen* as well. The narrative tells the story about the 42-year-old Gabriel Lightfoot, called Gabe, who is working as an executive chef at The Imperial Hotel in Piccadilly, London. His life seems to be fairly controlled when the story begins; he plans to marry and start a family with his girlfriend Charlie at the same time as he is planning to open a restaurant of his own. But Gabe's happiness does not continue. The death of the porter Yuri, changes Gabe's life and turns it upside down. Like *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen, Gabe starts questioning his own identity and becomes increasingly unsure of who he really is. This is also true of several other characters in the novel. I have already described how Gabe's father Ted and grandmother Nana fear that the British identity will disappear with the new multiethnic society. But to both of them, identity when it comes to themselves is of concern as well. I will also comment on Charlie, Lena, Gabe's mother Sally Ann, his sister Jenny and on immigrants in relation to the topic as they all strive to find their true selves.

In addition, I will focus on many of the same issues as I discussed when writing about *Brick Lane*, and compare them when relevant.

### 3.2 Life, Death and Loneliness

As was the case in *Brick Lane*, the theme of death is significant and portrayed right from the beginning of *In the Kitchen*. When the porter Yuri is found dead in the hotel basement, we see the first sign of Gabe feeling that he has failed. He starts thinking of what he should have

done, and shows his insecurity. Thus, this death marks the beginning of Gabe's identity confusion and the search to find out about who he really is,

What if Yuri was not dead? Benny had told him with a calm and unquestionable certainty that Yuri was dead. But what if he was still alive? There was a pool of blood around his head and he didn't look like a living thing because his legs, his chest, were blue, but who wouldn't be cold, stretched out naked and bleeding on the icy catacomb floor? Gabe should have checked for a pulse, he should have put something soft beneath Yuri's head, at the very least he should have called for an ambulance. *I should have sent a doctor, Yuri, not Mr James with his bloody Montblanc fountain pen and his executive leather pad.* (10, italics in the original)

Through this incident, death is starting to trouble Gabe. He is haunted by nightmares about his former colleague, and dreams that he himself is buried in food. The saying 'Nightmares won't kill you' helps Gabe to a certain point, but eventually his quest to find out about Yuri's life, why he was down in the catacombs and why he died, becomes an obsession (122, 212, 284). The commis chef Nikolai, one of Gabe's best workers, is really a doctor. He finds the nightmares to continue to subsist because Gabe feels responsible for the death (291). Yet, he also believes that the significance of Yuri's death is that it is insignificant, and therefore so troubling (360). Gabe has stopped caring about so many things in life, and he eventually seems to realise this through the incident of his colleague. According to John S. Stephenson in *Death and Identity*, the severity of grief is not dependant on social interaction between two persons:

Individuals may grieve over the loss of someone with whom they had only a brief, cursory relationship. A person may grieve deeply over the loss of someone with whom they have not actually interacted, but whom they strongly identified. The determining factor is not necessarily the proximity of the individuals or the social significance of the relationship, but rather the importance that the griever assigns to the lost person. (137-138)



Gabe and Yuri did not have a close relationship. Still, Yuri's death is very upsetting to Gabe who begins to grieve for him. As the protagonist starts to investigate Yuri's life, he discovers that they had one crucial thing in common: loneliness. Using Stephenson's theory, it seems like the fact that they both are lonely is what causes Gabe to be so troubled by the death, and to mourn Yuri.

But Yuri's death is not the only one in Ali's novel. When Gabe learns that his father Ted is dying from cancer, he desperately wants to improve their long lost relationship. Both Ted's house and Gabe's childhood town of Blantwistle, are also marked by death. Ted is taking care of and living together with his old mother-in-law who is demented. Her daughter and Ted's former wife Sally Ann, died from a heart attack many years ago. When Gabe visits his sick father, he is also told that Sally Ann was suffering from bipolar disorder. His sister Jenny is asthmatic and her former hopes and dreams for her life are dead and gone. Simultaneously, the last mill in the industrial town is closing down. Hence, death and illness mark Gabe's family and old home.

Trying to rebuild their relationship, Ted and Gabe lead long conversations. Ted tells his son about three young boys who fought a snowstorm, but did not make it (299-300). Just like in *Brick Lane*, snowstorms become a symbol of survival or death, both in nature and in the shape of a globe. You have to go through many difficulties to stay alive, and this story shows that life is not always fair. But snowstorms may also protect you. When Gabe takes his girlfriend Charlie for a walk into the Great Court, it is compared to a snowglobe, like the ones in Dr. Azad's office (219).

Going back to Blantwistle makes Gabe remember many incidents from his childhood, several of them unwillingly. Death in *In the Kitchen* is further portrayed when Gabe recalls the accident at Ted's workplace that killed his colleague Jimmy (199-200). Gabe's past also makes him think of how he wished his father would die, and how he actually believed his

wish came true (259, 261). Like *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen, young Gabe also got to choose between life and death. While Nazneen had the choice whether to untie and free a man hanging from a tree, Gabe chose to rescue a bird. But as it turns out to be dead, he realises that death cannot be controlled, even though the bird looked alive (277). Gabe does not want death to come, something that also follows him through his adult life, and is one of the reasons why he has a breakdown.

The episode with the bird is not exceptional. Ali uses the same kind of bird images not only in *Brick Lane*, but *Alentejo Blue* as well as in *In the Kitchen*. In *Alentejo Blue*, the character João reflects on birds. A bird never has to think about what to do next at the same time as it always knows how it feels. The protagonists Nazneen and Gabe are on the contrary unsure about themselves, their lives and feelings in large parts of the novels. This way, the bird represents the opportunities they both finally seek. In *In the Kitchen*, birds seem to appear when Gabe is feeling good about himself (41, 297-298, 398, 424). As we will see, this happens quite rarely in the novel. But both Nazneen (in the beginning) and Gabe want to escape. While Nazneen wants to escape her new life and identity as an immigrant in England, Gabe wants to get away from the death which surrounds him and his life. Hasina's bird in addition to pigeons portrayed in *In the Kitchen*, cannot escape, just like Gabe cannot escape death. Gabe wants control, but is unable to control this part of life. And when he sees a cyclist getting hit by a car, he gets even more aware of death (279).

Lena, Gabe's lover, is described as birdlike. The chef thinks she resembles a bird, a dying swan (123). Based on my interpretation of birds in the novel, it seems like he knows he will only keep Lena for a while. She will eventually disappear, die, and there is nothing he can do to stop the development. Gabe himself is compared to an angel in the novel (85, 388, 426). In the Bible, the angel Gabriel is the one who tells Maria she will become the mother of Jesus (The Gospel According to Luke 1: 26). Seeing it like this, Gabriel represents existence,

but there is a thin line between life and death. The Angel of Death is also mentioned in the novel (36). But as birds sing in the closing stages of the novel, it seems like Gabe will go on leading a good life despite his problems and the cases of death he has experienced (424). He will not fly away, but face himself and his identity. The fact that he now is aware of his mortality, makes him feel more alive (298).

The line between life and death is further shown through suicides in the novel. Both chef Terry and chef Loiseau kill themselves in the hunt for a Michelin star (57, 76). A girl's father committing suicide when his daughter is forced into prostitution, is also described in Ali's narrative (236). Death and murder are in addition part of the chef de partie Benny's stories (118, 120-121). While the pimp Boris wants to kill the prostitute Lena, Gabe says he wants to kill one of her costumers who has mistreated her (155, 320, 342). Lena herself also promises to kill this client if she ever meets him again (238). The two rivals Victor and Ivan, both working for Gabe in the hotel kitchen, threaten to kill each other as well (263). Even Gabe's girlfriend, the always enthusiastic Charlie, is thinking about death in *In the Kitchen* (146-147).

Monica Ali consistently uses a vocabulary overwhelmingly full of words related to death. Maybe not always meant literally by the characters, expressions and references to death are evident – many hardly noticed because they are very common everyday expressions. The porter Ernie is 'scared half to death' by the computer, while Gabe is so annoyed by the executive sous-chef Oona that he think he will drop down dead of anger (19, 48). Things that we usually do not think of as dead, are personified: lunch service, throbbing, light, the town, air-condition, the union model of labour, irritation, a relationship and a shape are all described as dead in the narrative (20, 102, 47, 136, 169, 256, 286, 326, 368, 393, 426). When Nana moves in with the Lightfoot family, Sally Ann claims that 'It'll be the death of me' and that 'She'll be the death of me' (62, 63). Gabe also dreams that he is falling. The fall is described

as weightless and dead, while Ted's colleague Mr. Nazir makes a joke about the weather which is so cold that they might catch their deaths (183, 195). Jenny warns her children they will be 'dead meat' if they do not listen to her, Nana's coat is described as 'smelling like a dead cat', and Nikolai has 'dead-white cheeks' (310, 189, 227).

This can also be applied to the main character Gabe who through his statements and thoughts illustrates his fear and insecurity about death. Charlie's perfume is described as having the ability to mask the smell of death, and shows that Gabe is aware of death even together with his girlfriend (166). This also goes for what he calls 'the business of dying' which is, according to Gabe, 'not his business' (168). He wants to put on his coat and leave his father, and by that also leave death. When Gabe one day is taking a walk back in London, there are no other persons in the streets besides himself and his friend. One of his first thoughts is then that maybe everyone has died (249).

Blood can be related to death as well, and is exposed in *In the Kitchen*. Gabe fears that the night in the restaurant might be so busy that it could be described as a bloodbath (99). When he as a boy cuts his finger and it starts to bleed, he is afraid he will bleed to death (199). The same also goes for the verb kill which is heavily used in Ali's descriptions. Desire can be killed, boots can kill you, a place may be killed, one can kill romance and even make a killing, conversation can be killed, you can go for the kill, and nightmares will not kill you (239, 425, 75, 119, 135, 231, 122, 212, 332, 284). Café owner Fazal states that the politicians are killing people like him with their regulations concerning a smoke-free environment (138). When Gabe tries to make contact with his niece Bailey, he tells her that he had a goth phase when he was about her age. Her answer is not very positive; "'I'd rather die", she said, "than be a goth. Seriously, I'd kill myself first'" (309). Gabe also has negative thoughts when he is thinking about Lena: 'If she didn't go up in a puff of smoke she could vanish simply by walking through the door and never coming back. It killed him. He died a little death every

time he thought of it` (319). In addition, the name Kilburn, which is where Lena was supposedly kept by her pimp, carries connotations to death and murder (154). When she lays down to rest in Gabe`s apartment, she sprawls across the bed like a homicide (383).

To be buried also rouses associations to death. When Gabe decides to not bury his head in the sand anymore, he uses an expression which means to stop hiding from things (333). Now, he needs to confront his own life and people in it. He also has to stop hiding from the truth, and realise that he cannot hide from death and illness. But I think that to bury also can be interpreted differently in this context. We bury our dead, something that occurs in the novel. Gabe is described as burying himself several times (154). In addition, he admits that he is not burying himself with Charlie, who says that it is his funeral – he can choose for himself (112). Further on, a girl working in a bar rises as from the grave, while as already mentioned, Gabe is almost throughout the novel troubled by nightmares where he is buried in food (115, 343). The night shift in the kitchen is also called the graveyard shift, and Gabe considers Mr. Maddox to look like a pallbearer waiting for the next coffin (113). Ali presents ghosts in her story as well; several characters look like they have seen one, and some look like ghosts themselves (317, 329, 413). Even clouds resemble ghosts in the narrative (334). The simile ‘The naked bulb dangling like a suicide`, is yet another example of the author`s use of words and expressions that impart the theme of death (102).

Life is a parallel to death, clearly shown through *In the Kitchen*. “Smoking is bad”, said Nikolai, “but it`s like life. Bad, but the alternative is worse”` (134). Nikolai`s view on life is not very optimistic. In the novel, many characters have to face their existence simply because they have very few options. Their alternative is to commit suicide. In some ways, life is like the catacombs in the hotel, ‘Turning the first corner, Gabe wondered how long the catacombs would be if he laid them end-to-end. They would be difficult to unravel; laid out in epileptic fits and starts, twists and dead ends` (23). One can never know how long life will

last, something many characters experience in the story. Like the catacombs, life is not easy to calculate as events cannot always be predicted.

Our protagonist seems to finally change at the end of the novel, but what about the other individuals we get to know through the narrative? Are they really victims of fate? (121). Gabe starts questioning this in relation to both his employees Benny and Nikolai. Earlier, Gabe has looked at his chef de partie Benny with pity. But this view alters:

All of a sudden and with tremendous force it struck Gabe that he had misunderstood everything about Benny. Benny was no mere victim, of war, poverty and fate. That he had made it this far, across continents, could be no accident. Here was a man who had hewn his own life, out of most difficult material, out of granite, and with only a blunt penknife. (355)

Gabe seems to realise that Benny actually is in control of his life. Benny is in fact able to choose what his future will look like. Through discussions between Gabe and Nikolai, Nikolai's fate is also revealed. He has accepted his new existence, and thus his destiny. But the two do not agree when it comes to how and why things happen in life. While Gabe believes in free will and choice, and that predestination does not exist as Nazneen in *Brick Lane* comes to believe, Nikolai thinks that human beings are much more controlled by forces outside them, and that there is no such thing as autonomy:

'Seriously', said Nikolai, 'let me ask you, let me find out what you believe. Do you believe, for example, that we are free to choose the most important things about our lives? To be born in the West in the twentieth century is the most enormous stroke of luck. After that, the parents we are given are the most significant factors to take into account. Would you not agree that the biggest events in our lives are things that happen to us, rather than things that we decided to do? And what of the present – our day-to-day conduct? Do we control even the basic functions? Can you wake when you want to? Sleep when you want to? Can you forget your dreams? Can you decide when to think, what to think about, when not to think at all?' (288)

He also argues that according to Freud, a person's background must be examined to understand his current behaviour. Hence, a person cannot behave freely for he will never be independent of his past. Gabe disagrees saying that each person makes choices all the time, but simultaneously, seems to comprehend Nikolai's point as he begins thinking of Michael Harrison: 'Michael Harrison, his childhood friend, slipped unbidden into Gabriel's mind. Not difficult to see, Gabe thought reluctantly, which way Michael was going to go. Then again, no, Michael was bright enough, Michael had probably made good' (289). Though Gabe and Michael only meet retrospectively in the novel, Gabe often thinks about him. We later get to know that Michael, who had a difficult childhood due to his alcoholic father, is doing eight years in prison. Nikolai's prediction proved to be correct in the case of Michael.

The discussion also confirms Gabe's need for control. He himself wants to be the one deciding what his life will look like, not his background. This may be the reason why he is so determined to prove Nikolai wrong. If he admits that Nikolai is right, he at the same time has to admit that he himself does not control all aspects of his life. What Nikolai states is almost a dig at him: Gabe is born in the West in the twentieth century, and he has after all been raised well by reasonably good parents. Gabe has trouble sleeping, and thus cannot control when to sleep. He cannot forget his dreams, something that becomes an immense problem. He cannot decide when to think, what to think about, nor can he decide not to think at all – something that would benefit him greatly and could have prevented the breakdown he eventually goes through. Gabe also reveals later when talking to Ernie that Nikolai's opinion about control and change might not be that incorrect. Ernie's life does not go as planned because you cannot control everything in life.

Life is not always sunny in *In the Kitchen*. Lena also has thoughts about life, and questions what is true and what is not. She concludes that there will always be another lie (127). Gabe ponders that if you want another life, you have to make a plan and stop dreaming.

Gabe has many ideas and dreams, and he desperately tries to put them into effect. But as they are not carried through, Gabe sees the whole world as a lie (141, 396). He describes his days with his old girlfriend saying they both were stuck in a life they did not want (101). But this is as applicable now as then, life is random and cruel (383). His father Ted is another character who has led a difficult life, worrying about the wrong things (318). At the end of his own life, he now advises his son not to do the same, and to move on even though life is hard and things do not always turn out the way you want them to. Gabe compares weaving with existence:

You said this thing about weaving. You said it's a bit like life. You've got the warp going one way, and it brings the pattern and the colour. And you've got to have the weft, the constant which runs through everything. Dad ...I ... sometimes I think ...?.

Is it that girl? That Lena? No, I've not forgot. Listen, son, you should know, threads break all the time. A decent weaver won't wait on a tackler. They'll fix it and get on. (283)

Through aspects of life, loneliness is apparent. Like in *Brick Lane*, the majority of the characters in *In the Kitchen* feel lonely, particularly the protagonist Gabe. Even though he has a girlfriend and a family, he is in many ways alone. When he goes to visit his family, he has not seen them in several years. The journey has an objective; he travels to spend time with his dying father with whom he has had a difficult relationship for a long time. When Gabe was little, he loved going with Ted to the mill where he was working. But this changed into something he despised. This transformation seems to be what causes the complications between Gabe and Ted.

I have already written about the mother of *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen, Rupban, and Homburger Erikson's theory about mothers. This can be applied to Gabe and his mother Sally Ann as well. Both Gabe and Nazneen have mothers who go through depressions, which they themselves also do as adults. Like Rupban, Sally Ann is a woman who loves desperately and intrusively. Maybe due to her illness, she is extremely hungry for approval and recognition.



When young Gabe runs home, eager to show the pincushion he has made at school to his mother, she is preoccupied by herself. She also wants her son to admire her for her looks:

He raced into her bedroom, thanking his lucky star that Jen had gone round to Bev`s after school. Now he would get Mum all to himself. He slid right into the foot of the bed, banged his shin and dropped the pincushion. He bent down and when he straightened up again she said, `Arise, Sir Gabriel`, and touched his shoulders with a curtain rod. Gabe stood puffing and panting, chiefly out of surprise. Mum laughed. `Stop your gawping, Gabriel. And tell me what you think`. She was twisting and turning in front of the mirror, wearing a pair of frilly bloomers, a skirt that seemed to be made of metal hoops joined by some sort of gauze, and a corset that pinched her breasts together. Her cheeks were pink as candy floss and she had ringlets, just like Jenny`s porcelain doll. She twisted some hair around a finger and said, `Rags. Nana used to do them for me, every Sunday for church. (51-52)

Gabe finds his pincushion under the bed when they later are about to move: `” I made that”, he said, blushing. “Did you, dear?” said Mum. He didn`t remember seeing it again after that` (53).

Another sign that Sally Ann is in need of attention, is the fact that she on a regular basis runs away with men – just like Hasina. This may also show that Sally Ann is lonely as well. Homburger Erikson writes: `In our context it is especially important that the mother is intensely jealous of any sign that the child may identify primarily with the father or, worse, base his very identity on that of the father` (177). The character Sally Ann feels jealous of the relationship between her son and husband. And she is certainly also lonely. Not explicitly shown in the novel, it still seems like the bond between Gabe and Ted vanishes because of Sally Ann. When Gabe identifies with his father, Sally Ann gets depressed. She wants her little boy to herself. Ted and Gabe`s relationship does not improve until Gabe is 42 years old and Ted is dying from cancer. When Gabe first arrives in Blantwistle after many years abroad and in London, Gabe experiences communication problems like the ones between Nazneen and her husband Chanu. Gabe finds it hard to talk to his father, and does not know what to

say (50). But in the long run, they realise that they are in fact lonely without each other. Gabe also sees the difficulties Ted had to face living with a bipolar wife. All his life, he has blamed Ted for the family's complications. Now, he starts seeing things from Ted's point of view.

When the long lost Gabe returns, he feels he knows his sister Jenny less every time he sees her (174). But the relationship between the siblings also improves when their father becomes ill. Still, Gabe is alone and questions loneliness in large parts of the book,

They had only seen each other for a second or two, the rest he had made up, invented now, tonight, because he was – what? – lonely? Was he lonely? Had he been lonely? Or was that something he had just now begun to feel? Was she making him lonely? It didn't make any sense. He was feverish. He couldn't think straight. He would take some more aspirins. (85)

Gabe has no true friends, and like Nazneen, appreciates the fact that Londoners do not interfere. No questions are asked (175, 233). But as the narrative evolves, Gabe changes his mind:

When he was growing up it wasn't like this at all. In those days people took an interest. They rallied round. They knew your name, at least. Now nobody had time. They didn't keep an eye out for anyone. If he went over and knocked on the door and said, *have you seen her?* they would smile politely and say, *who?* (336, italics in the original)

Thinking about how things were before, makes Gabe feel even more alone. A result of this loneliness might be the affair he starts with Lena. Lena is a former prostitute working at the same hotel as Gabe. She lives in the catacombs together with Yuri, hiding from her pimp. When Yuri dies, Gabe decides to take Lena home with him. A strange relationship between the two is born. By cheating on his girlfriend Charlie, Gabe tries to eliminate the feeling that he is completely alone in the world. At the end of the novel, he realises that the loneliness is caused by himself, though. He has built walls, walls that have stopped him from socialising

with other people, and have made him feel lonely (384). His profession with long hours and night shifts has also contributed to Gabe's loneliness. The walls can be compared to the bricks in *Brick Lane*. If they are torn down, the loneliness will be as well. Bricks do also have other functions. Yuri and Lena are shielded by bricks down in the basement. Ted finds bricks to be helpful as well, as they are protective (247). Bricks and walls do shield a person from difficulties in life, but in Gabe's case, they have only caused loneliness.

Other characters in *In the Kitchen* are lonely too. One of them is Lena who is lonely when Gabe finds her, but also when he takes her home. Throughout the novel, she talks about her alleged brother Pasha, but without ever meeting him. Even Gabe, caught up in his own confused and egocentric thoughts about Lena and that she must never leave him, describes her as lonely (87). Both Lena and *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen use the television to escape loneliness and reality – at the same time as it shows them their opportunities in life.

Lena's deceased friend Yuri and other immigrants working in the kitchen are also alone in the world. Having to leave their families, friends and home countries behind for different reasons, they must feel lonely in England: 'Yuri was lying somewhere, unattended, on a mortuary slab. It was loneliness, certainly, that killed Yuri' (25). Even the restaurant is, according to Gabe, infected with loneliness (8).

### 3.3 Identity and Diaspora

Through the lonely immigrant workers in Gabe's kitchen, diaspora is relevant. Above, I discussed the role of Hasina in relation to the concept of home, using Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's description of diaspora: a scattering that 'leads to splitting in the sense of home' (425). The immigrants Nikolai (Russian), Yuri (Ukrainian), Lena (Belarusian), Olek (Ukrainian), Oona (Caribbean), Ivan (Slavic), Benny (Liberian), Victor (Moldovan) and

Suleiman (Indian) all have left their countries for The United Kingdom, without ever really finding a new home in England. Gabe asks both Benny and Lena about their homes. He wonders if Benny has someone home waiting for him. Benny replies that it depends on what he means about home. It seems like neither Liberia nor England has provided him with what can be called a home. When Gabe asks Lena why she does not go home, she answers that people like her do not have homes (235). Having been moved around by her pimp Boris, she has never been able to settle. And she cannot go back to Belarus because of what Boris has threatened to do to her family. Like *Brick Lane*'s Hasina, Lena just finds non-permanent places to stay. Gabe visualises Lena living in his apartment forever, and even pretends he will help her find Pasha by hiring a private detective so her stay will be prolonged. But like Hasina, she leaves in the end of the novel in search of somewhere to call home.

Furniture was symbolic of obstacles in *Brick Lane*. Gabe finds the furniture in his flat to be almost alien:

Back in the sitting room he paced steadily. The more he looked at the furniture the less familiar it felt. The hard green sofa belonged in a waiting room, the black chaise was hideous, the lacquered shelves were empty and the white-cube coffee table was pretentious beyond belief. Who would want to live here? Who could call this place a home? (335-336)

Having fled from his childhood town of Blantwistle, being abroad for many years, it seems like even the British Gabe has trouble finding a real home in England, just like the Bangladeshi Hasina never finds one in Bangladesh.

*In the Kitchen* is a novel about identity. Right from the beginning of the narrative, we see signs showing the theme. Most of the story evolves round the hotel. But even the hotel itself lacks an identity: 'If the Imperial were a person, thought Gabe, you would say here is someone who does not know who she is' (28). Gabe is annoyed by the plastic flowers present

in the restaurant (7, 8, 76, 281). They seem to be one reason why he finds the hotel to have no identity. That the flowers are not real, makes Gabe feel that nothing is, and that everything around him lacks any kind of identity. His colleague and restaurant manager Gleeson however, sees things differently, claiming that the flowers are made of silk. Gabe finds him fake as well as the flowers (93, 329-331). Other objects are also false. Ali describes fake leather, fake windows, fake words and fake arguments (174, 190, 197, 215, 346). As Gabe decides to see the Changing of the Guard, he is disappointed, finding them to look like toy soldiers and therefore fake. The tourists, on the other hand, do not see this and are pleased to observe the Britain they wished to see (241). But this is not the truth. Even back home in Blantwistle, the plants are made of rubber and the holly and mistletoe made of plastic (300, 198, 308). It seems like Gabe`s whole world is unreal and without identity. You keep who you really are to yourself (67). This perception of everything being fake is very much part of Gabe`s identity crisis. Already on page nine of the novel, it becomes clear that he has issues related to his personality:

Sometimes, if he was busy completing order forms or logging timesheets, Gabe let his phone ring until it beeped and played the message. *You have reached the office of Gabriel Lightfoot, executive chef of the Imperial Hotel, London. Please leave your name and number after the tone and he will call you back as soon as possible.* To listen to it you`d think the office was something else, that he was someone else, altogether. (italics in the original)

Almost throughout the book, Gabe, just like Nazneen, struggles to find his true character. When he was a young boy, he knew his place and was one of the members of the group (156). Now, Gabe claims to be living a phoney life where everything seems unreal (33). His identity is compared to a mannequin`s which looks anonymous, indistinct and featureless with every characteristic obliterated or obscured (254). Gabe has many dreams and plans for the future, but they are never realised. I find this to show his insecurity. Through his actions, or in this

case through what he does not complete, Gabe's lack of self-confidence is apparent. Since he was 15 years old, he has planned to open his own restaurant. He wants to move in with and propose to his girlfriend, to start a family, to get to know his employees better, to improve his relationship with his family. The main character also feels uncertain about his work. He states that he is not working at the restaurant because he wants to, but because he wants to prove himself (11). He later wonders if he has fallen out of love with food, and questions if he was meant to be a chef at all (88). Maybe he chose the profession only to annoy his father (316). The confused Gabe asks chef de partie Suleiman, the only one of Gabe's workers who shows a genuine interest in food, if he always knew he was going to cook (266). But Gabe still does not gain enlightenment, realising his own confusion; 'Why didn't he know what he wanted?' (312). This is also related to Lena as Gabe does not understand why he keeps cheating on Charlie. He admits that Lena and he are poles apart while Charlie and he are the same (211). Still, he makes himself believe that he loves Lena. In *Death and Identity*, John S. Stephenson states that: 'The loss of one's role is another form of loss of self which may foster a grief reaction' (139). As Gabe never manages to realise his plans, he also in many ways loses his role as a future father, husband, restaurant owner and devoted chef, son, brother and uncle. Using Stephenson's theory, grief and identity confusion are normal reactions.

Gabe has a bald patch on his head. During the novel, this middle age cliché worries him. Gabe also keeps pulling his hair without knowing it (195). I find the patch to represent two things. First of all, it is a symbol of Gabe's life. Like the patch, his problems are growing bigger and bigger, and he is no more able to control the difficulties which lead to his breakdown, than the fact that he is going bald (323). It also represents what is absent in the protagonist's life. Something is missing, but Gabe does not see this.

Gabe has hopes that his life and identity will straighten out with the new restaurant, and that his questions will be answered. But he is not sure they will: 'Am I the kind of person

who does this? he thought. Is this me, am I this type?' (123). 'What was his personality anyway?' (369). 'But he wasn't the kind of person to ... or was he?' (407). Gabe further shows his insecurity by comparing himself to his friend and junior minister Fairweather when a woman asks Fairweather if he is somebody: 'He was delighted, of course. He was somebody. What was the alternative? A nobody. If you were more than your own self you were somebody, and if you weren't "somebody" perhaps being yourself amounted to nothing at all' (111-112). Gabe also later states that 'Who was he? He was nobody' (406). There is antagonism between Gabe and Ernie. While Ernie has done the same work and been living the same life for numerous years, Gabe cannot settle. As he asks Ernie if he wants change and Ernie answers no, the chef shows his own desires at the same time as Ernie's life choices are made clear. Yes, Ernie has been living a life without alteration, but this does not mean that he has led a sad or boring life. As opposed to Gabe's, his life has been steady. It seems like changes do not result in finding your true identity.

Similar to *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen, Gabe's identity crisis causes a breakdown. In advance of the incident, Gabe seems fairly in control, never losing his temper (22, 73). But as soon as he brings Lena home, he proves this wrong. Quite early in the narrative, it becomes clear that Gabe is on the edge of a collapse:

The flyer was spattered and smeared and curling up in the edges. Why had he not taken it down immediately? He ripped it off the wall and tossed it on the floor. The patch of crumbling plaster which was revealed began to flake and fall. Gabriel looked round wildly, kicking over the brochures as he turned. There was fungus growing in a tiny damp patch over the skirting board. He began to rub it off. There was clutter on top of the filing cabinet. A tennis ball, one glove, a meat thermometer, a box of paperclips, a plastic box, a tin of lipsalve, two yellowing copies of the *Sun*. Who the hell kept making all this mess? He cleared it all off, on to the floor. Too many things on the desk. He scraped everything into the drawers and closed them. He sat down again to an empty desk, feeling better. He could have a clear run at things now. (48-49, italics in the original)

This passage also confirms Gabe`s need for control. When Oona claims that things sometimes are meant to be and sometimes not, Gabe disagrees (49-50, 359). Nikolai believes things cannot always be controlled, while Gabe does not want anything or anyone in charge of his life, believing he himself can be in charge of what happens in his life (359): ‘Why let other people be in charge of your cooking – your life – when you can be in charge of it yourself?’ (76). But obviously, this is easier said than done in *In the Kitchen*. An example is Gabe`s inability to control what happens to his sick father; an issue throughout the novel. When the panic attack hits Gabe, it is due to many things he cannot be in command of, things he cannot change, things he is unable to do. Yuri`s death, the police investigation and the country`s economy, are of vast concern. In addition, he is troubled by his relationship with Charlie, his affair with Lena, his present job and his new job, his family and his lack of friends, the news about his mother having an illness without him knowing about it, but most importantly his identity.

Even though Gabe is good at seeing other people and understanding them, several colleagues realise that Gabe is depressed before he is able to admit it himself (101). Both Albert and Gleeson confront the chef telling him he is depressed (292, 367). Nikolai insinuates a middle age crisis, camouflaged through a character in a novel (345). When the panic attack hits Gabe, he does not realise what is happening, believing he is dreaming (251). Similar to Nazneen, he feels he cannot move. The next time it happens, he thinks he is suffering from a heart attack (295). When it happens for the third time, what causes what now can be called a nervous breakdown, becomes very clear. Like Nazneen, Gabe goes through an identity crisis because he is unsure about who he is, ‘Something surged and sucked back inside him, like a tide that was going out. He needed to know now, and he needed to know urgently, what he was` :



What am I? he thought. What am I? the question pinged round and round plaintively until, firing faster and faster, it took on a sharper edge. What am I? What am I? A nobody? A nothing? A zero? Am I a hollow man? He was angry. He was furious. He backed out of the hole into which he had forced himself. He rubbed his arms to get circulation started again.

Gabriel paced the office floor. What was he? Was he a man without qualities? A man about whom nothing could be said? (372)

Obsessed by finding out how other people look at him, Gabe appears in his former girlfriend's apartment, scratching his head until the blood trickles. The confused Gabe, talking and talking, and is not understood by Charlie. Out on the streets again, Gabe starts running without knowing where he is. He is like Nazneen lost in London without knowing what to do or where to go (389). Similar to Nazneen, he also sees signs on his way that do not help him as they do not appear when he needs them (378-379). They do not tell him how to lead his life or anything about his identity.

There are other characters struggling with identity as well. Charlie, Gabe's girlfriend, may seem like a strong woman, but she is also unsure about herself and her personality. She is working as a singer, but is like Gabe not confident about her choice of profession: "I'm not really a musician, am I? Not really a singer. Don't even know what I want to listen to" (141). She tells her boyfriend - seeming pretty certain about her plans - that she is thinking about teacher training to be a classroom assistant. But later during the same conversation, she is not as determined anymore:

'But you're serious about the teaching idea?' 'Me, honey?' She put on her breathy, jazz-set voice. 'Who, me? Can you picture it? Chained to a classroom every day? I like my freedom too much. I like saying yes or no to a gig'. (147-148)

Gabe also notes that Charlie has problems related to her identity. When she makes jokes about herself, it is because she is insecure (145). Gabe tells Nikolai about her, and marks that he

describes her as unstable, 'She was changeable, that was the thing. Be one way and then another. Contradict herself. Hadn't she said to him, *I'm only going to ask this one time* – and then she asked him again` (229, italics in the original). Charlie admits herself that just like Gabe, she is a person who always thinks but never acts (146). The 38-year-old is childless too, and seems to be unable to settle.

I have already described Gabe's mother Sally Ann. Being bipolar also resulted in insecurity. Several episodes in the novel divulge that Sally Ann wants to do something else in her life, to be someone else (55-56). Instead, she runs away with men, hides purchases from her husband and secretly goes out for drinks (179-180, 55). Also due to her illness and medication, Sally Ann changes: "She changed so much, it was like she lost her personality. Like she wasn't her anymore" (305).

Sally Ann's mother, Phyllis Henrietta Josephine Higson, called Nana in the novel, gives the impression that she wants to be someone else as well. Nana wants to be someone she is not, pretending that she is upper class, praising her husband. When she idealises her former life, she seems to have forgotten the negative sides. As Gabe first arrives in Blantwistle, he does not recognise her (163). In some ways, Nana has lost her identity. But when the story comes to an end, Gabe and his sister Jenny agree that even though Nana is suffering from dementia, she is still the person she has always been.

Much of the same can actually be applied to Jenny. What hits Gabe when seeing her again after several years, is that she has changed:

Gabe held the phone from his ear. Two year ago – was it three? – he had been affronted when Jenny walked into the kitchen in Plodder Lane and he saw how old she had become, how middle age had enveloped her like the layers of fat on her arms, her legs, her neck. Jenny, who used to drop one laconic word in the pub and send everyone scurrying to pick it up, frame it and hand it around. She used so many words now and all of them passed you by. (37)

But despite the modifications, Jenny is like Nana still the same person with the same identity. Jenny is aware of this herself: "I am myself. What you see is what you get, Gabriel. And if you don't like it you know what you can do" (179). In addition, she shows that she knows who she is, as opposed to Gabe and Charlie: "Don't give me that". "Where did the old Jenny go?" "Remember how it used to be?" "Well, I'm sorry, but *I'm* not a teenager any more. I am what I am, Gabriel. I am me" (313, italics in the original). Obviously, it is possible to change without losing your identity.

### 3.4 Feminism and Racism

Women and immigrants in *In the Kitchen* are as described above also marked by identity issues. They are further portrayed as Gabe discovers two important things in the novel, one related to racism and colonialism, the other to feminism. When he is told to find out what is going on in the hotel by the general manager Maddox, his suspicions towards Gleeson, the restaurant manager, grow. At the end of the novel, Gabe reveals that Gleeson and his colleague Ivan function as pimps at The Imperial. They recruit girls from the hotel because no one knows them, no one misses them. The girls are promised a career within singing, dancing or bartending, in addition to a lot of money (363). The same Gleeson is the man behind Gabe's second discovery as well. With the help of his brother, he runs a farm where the employees are underpaid immigrants who are treated very badly and have their passports taken from them to lose all their rights (392-416).

Racism is further apparent through the anecdotes from Gabe's childhood. Clichés declare that immigrants breed like rabbits, never scrub their doorsteps, they make curry with Pal dog meat, piss on the flagstones, sleep in people's attics while always complaining (53, 100, 164-165, 170). Gabe and his friends used to walk behind them, making monkey noises

(100). But the adult Gabe defends the immigrants when discussing the country with Ted (169-170). While several of the older British characters fear that England will lose its identity because of the new multiculturalism, the protagonist disagrees. Through several coincidences, he gets the opportunity to really learn how impecunious foreigners are treated and looked upon. In the middle of nowhere, on Gleeson`s farm picking onions together with illegal immigrants, Gabe gets his revelation. Who he is, does not really matter:

Only a couple of days ago he had been convulsed with worry about who he thought he was. Was he this way or that? What did people think of him? It made him smile to himself. What did it matter? He wasn`t Danilo Hetman. He wasn`t Gabriel Lightfoot. He wasn`t anybody, he was just a man, digging in the soil. He let it all go and sank into a deep warm pool of calm. All those anxious days chasing his tail, scheming, scheduling, plotting, moving restlessly from one care to the next, justifying, reasoning, arguing with himself, all the tension and contradiction, the endless search to get whatever it was he wanted, although he did not know what it was. He exhaled long and hard and let go of everything. He didn`t need it anymore. (402-403)

Nana is one of the novel`s characters who through her stories and statements seems to be a racist. But her beliefs are actually ironic as the immigrants represent the things she misses the most; `Kids in shined shoes and new clothes, it still happened, but only for Eid. Large families, clubbing together, kinship and community` (304).

In *Brick Lane*, the second generation immigrants encounter difficulties. To find an identity is hard for young people in *In the Kitchen* as well. Asif and Amir, the grandsons of Ted`s colleague Mr. Nazir, have trouble settling. Amir is charged with vandalism while Asif is obsessed by Islam, but at the same time he follows Western values. They can be said to be part of Erik Homburger Erikson`s stage five of psychosocial development; Identity vs. Identity confusion which adolescents will reach as they seek to find themselves (94). As in the case of the characters Shahana and Tariq, Christina Julios`s theory that it is hard for second-generation UK-born immigrants to acquire an identity because of the many cultural

differences they meet, can be applied here too (12-13). It is not unusual to act out like Asif and Amir do because they struggle with a double identity. Being influenced by very different cultures, it is not easy to find an identity of your own. Edmund Cusick's theory in *British Cultural Identities* is also relevant in this context. He claims that to children of immigrants who grow up in Britain, the challenge is to create a new British Islamic identity by combining religious traditions with British life (291). This is very significant to the minor character Asif in particular. Like Karim in *Brick Lane*, he wants to front his religion, and does what Frantz Fanon stresses in his article 'On National Culture' - he tries to demonstrate that his people and Islam exist by always reciting the Quran.

The protagonist of *In the Kitchen* is not a woman as in Ali's first novel. Still, *In the Kitchen* can be read as a feminist text as the women are portrayed through important events which in many ways form the basis of the novel. Most clearly, this is shown in the case of the doubly oppressed Lena; both a woman and an immigrant. Lena is a victim of prostitution and trafficking. She has been treated badly and controlled by men almost all her life. As already discussed, things do not necessarily turn out for the better when she meets Gabe and he takes her back to his apartment where she feels trapped. Lena also tells the depressing stories about other girls who have suffered the same fate as herself – or even worse.

When Gabe sees a woman 'entirely blotted out by a large black sheet, a black veil over her head', he states that immigrant females see things in black and white:

The thing was, that woman – those women – they'd decided there was only one way to look at things. Black and white. *This is who I am. This is what I am.* Easy. All your answers, ready made. Not like the rest of us. We have to make it up as we go along. (304, italics in the original)

Gabe compares himself and 'us' with 'those women'. By doing that, he makes a division between us, the white British people, and them, the foreign women. Through his statement,

his thoughts on identity are also apparent. While he struggles to find out about his personality, it almost seems like he envies conservative Muslim women who in his view only have one way to look at things. They convince themselves about their identity, something Gabe is unable to do.

Further on, women are exposed through descriptions which are not very flattering. Throughout the novel, unfaithful men bring their mistresses to the hotel. Like Gabe, these men have few second thoughts about what they are doing, and they share a view of women as sexual commodities. If it was not for the sexual harassment laws, the hotel would be heaven on earth, according to Gleeson (97). Rolly, Gabe's business partner, believes that since women can multi-task while men cannot, women should be the ones doing household chores. It is no use trying to change men into doing this since scientific evidence shows that it is impossible (69). Nikolai sees a woman simply as a worker, a mother and a wife, while Suleiman tells stories of arranged marriages (229, 347). Women struggle in *In the Kitchen* as well as in *Brick Lane*.

### 3.5 Love, Happiness and Concluding Remarks

Love and happiness are not very much in evidence in *In the Kitchen*. Still, there are signs that these topics exist alongside the themes of death and loneliness. When Gabe finds his true identity after all, it is because of joy and love.

Gabe claims to love several times in the book. He loves his girlfriend Charlie, but also his lover Lena. In addition, his life revolves around his much appreciated cooking. But when insecurity hits him, and he no longer knows if he loves all these things, love becomes an enemy. During Gabe's panic attack, he is very aware of love, quoting the Bible: '*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love*' (The Epistle of St.

Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians 13: 13, Ali: 380, italics in the original). Back in his flat, he realises that love is important and that it is more present in his life than he thought. Suddenly, Gabe is filled with love,

She [Lena] had not believed him when he said he had loved her. Well, she had been right. But he loved her now, pure and true. If he had loved before it was only blue flicker and red crackle, not his still white heart of flame. She turned on her back. Love lifted him off his feet. He loved Lena as he should. He had it in him. He loved Charlie and always had. He loved Dad and he loved Nana and Jenny and Harley and Bailey and it was inexhaustible, inextinguishable, this love of his. He looked around at the blandly furnished bedroom and saw its potential. All it lacked was some photographs, some flowers, a few touches to bring it to life. Even a room needed love. (382)

When Gabe speaks of his bedroom, it becomes a symbol of himself. His potential is there, but at the same time hard to see. Like the room, Gabe only lacks a few things to be happy and feel that he is alive. What he needs is love.

Nikolai and Gabe discuss happiness when Gabe asks the Russian if he is pleased with his life. Nikolai tells about the Happiness Day Parade back in his home country where everybody had to march through town with banners. The children were ordered to be happy, but tried to be miserable to contradict the authorities. The outcome was eventually that nothing could have made the children happier than the parade as they could not help enjoying it. Nikolai also compares Russia and England with reference to Gabe: "Unhappiness is normal but if we are unhappy we think that we have failed. Every day in this country is a Happy Day Parade, but we don't march shoulder to shoulder, each must march alone" (342). Nikolai is right when Gabe understands that he is unhappy, he thinks he has failed. These emotions contribute to the breakdown. Nikolai also comments on the missing British interdependence which Nana misses so much. Gabe is on his own, having to deal with the identity crisis by himself without anyone knowing or caring.

After the breakdown, love and happiness give Gabe an opportunity to take hold of his

own life and start afresh with his newly discovered personality. He is reunited with his family after many years, and works things out with his father prior to his death. The relationship with his sister Jenny has also greatly improved, and he has learned the truth about his bipolar mother. Lena leaves, hopefully for a better future. With money from Gabe, her life may turn out better than expected. Even Gabe appears to accept that she is gone as he and Charlie plan to meet. Gabe, who earlier seemed not to believe in happy endings, in many ways gets a happy ending himself (84). Using Homburger Erikson's identity theory, Gabe's positive identity is revealed at the end of Ali's novel. Not shown as clearly as in the case of Nazneen, Gabe still knows where he is going and who is going with him. He has managed to overcome his identity crisis, and now knows who he is. His family and Charlie are his priority when the story comes to an end. Hall's theory that an identity is always in process and never complete, can be applied to Gabe. He changes a great deal during *In the Kitchen*, being transformed from an insecure man suffering a breakdown to a man who has found his identity and who knows what really matters in life. Gabe's mother Sally Ann told him that 'no matter how many weeds you pull up, there'll always be more', symbolising that there will always be problems in life (403). At the end of the novel, Gabe realises that although there will always be more weed, he will manage.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that the main themes of Monica Ali's novels *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* are life, death and loneliness. Identity is also crucial in her books as almost all the characters strive with questions about who they really are. Nazneen in *Brick Lane* goes through a breakdown in her new country England. Being controlled by people such as Mrs. Islam and her husband Chanu when she at the same time encounters a culture completely different from the one she has grown up with, she becomes completely confused. In addition, the death of her son Raqib troubles Nazneen deeply. Similar to Gabe in *In the Kitchen*, she takes a lover, and both the characters find out the truth about their respective mothers, a truth that makes them see things differently – especially in relation to their fathers. All these things contribute to Nazneen's breakdown.

*In the Kitchen's* Gabe goes through an identity crisis when his father is dying and Gabe becomes aware of his own mortality. The crisis is further expanded as Gabe starts taking chances: he invests money in opening a restaurant of his own, he proposes to his girlfriend Charlie, and he faces his childhood town of Blantwistle – a town he has avoided for many years. He also eventually rebuilds his relationship with his father and sister. But when Charlie does no longer want to see him and the problems with his family grow, when he loses the possibility to open his own restaurant and he becomes utterly aware of his age, Gabe breaks down. Obviously, identity trouble is not restricted to immigrants. Thus, I find that questions of identity in postcolonial literature can be used in other areas – in *In the Kitchen*, Gabe moves from one class (the one he grows up with in the small industrial town in Northern England) to another (the one in the capital of London as a chef in a high-class hotel).

The fact that you are living in the country where you were born, does not necessarily mean that confusion cannot strike you. The novels *Brick Lane*, *Alentejo Blue* and *In the*

*Kitchen* basically deal with the same issues, but in different environments. While both *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* portray today`s London, *Alentejo Blue* is set in a small Portuguese town called Mamarrosa. Here, there are no main characters, as opposed to Ali`s other novels. The characters are also of different origins; the young Portuguese girl Teresa lives together with her brother and mother in a small house, but dreams about going to England, while the old man Rui has spent all his life in the village of Mamarrosa, hiding his homosexual orientation. The obese and asthmatic café owner Vasco finds comfort in food, and the vulgar Potts family arrives from England, only to cause problems to themselves. Their countrymen Harry Stanton, the middle aged Mowatts and the engaged couple Huw and Sophie, also settle in the small town. Despite the differences of the characters, they have things in common, things that are obvious in *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* as well – they are all living lives in loneliness at the same time as they are connected to death in different kinds of ways.

In *Death and Identity*, Robert Fulton and Greg Own argue that there have been changes in our attitudes towards death. According to them, the late German historian Franz Borkenau was one of the first scholars to recognise new definitions of the social self and the social order: ‘It was Borkenau`s conviction that to avoid existential extinction, the individual would find a sense of identity through some temporal absolute such as a racial, social or national group` (18). This is exactly what the characters of *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* do. To escape death, Nazneen finds her identity through England and the Bangladeshi group of women. Gabe does the same with the help of his family and English home town Blantwistle. His father Ted does not avoid death, but finds his identity due to the national group he belongs to (white, male, working class, English born and bred), in addition to his occupation. The same goes for his mother-in-law Nana. *Brick Lane`s* Chanu strives to keep his identity through Bangladesh, while his daughter Shahana and Nazneen`s friend Razia and her son Tariq do the opposite. They confirm their existence by acquiring a British identity.

Despite problems related to life, death and loneliness, the main characters Nazneen and Gabe are both left to hope in the end. During Nazneen's first years in England, she is always insecure about herself, and often changes her mind, fearing that people will judge her. Inspired by her friend Razia, Nazneen soon starts developing. Razia does not care much about what other people think; she dresses in a Union Jack sweatshirt, works, expresses her own opinions and takes care of her children on her own. Dr Azad's wife, although not a role model, also represents the modern, feminist, Western woman Nazneen eventually starts to become. By the end of the novel, Nazneen handles her life far better than her husband Chanu who struggles towards something he does not know, not succeeding in English society. The past and the so-called Going Home Syndrome control his life while his wife starts looking towards the future in the new country. As she moves forward, Chanu is moving back.

The history of Gabe also ends in a positive way. Even though his father dies, his Nana is sent to a nursing home and the plans about his own restaurant are not realised, Gabe now seems to face a bright future. By the end of the novel, he is talking to Charlie on the phone, planning to meet for lunch. He has also let go of Lena, finally a selfless act. After all, Gabe has faced and accepted his background together with his own identity.

Annette Kolodny writes in her article 'Dancing through the Minefield' that 'What is important about a fiction is not whether it ends in death or a marriage, but what the symbolic demands of that particular conventional ending imply about the values and beliefs of the world that engendered it' (112). Kolodny also quotes Kennard who fears that independence and individuality are too often sacrificed (112). At the end of *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen*, both Nazneen and Gabe show that this is not the case, and I find the values and beliefs to be visible through the characters as they eventually learn the ropes. It seems like the snow has settled for both Gabe and Nazneen.

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